The Jigsaw Killer

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The Jigsaw Killer

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Summary

A new case captured the attention of a nation: the Jigsaw Killings.

There were few clue to the identity of the Jigsaw Killer, but it was clear that he was sending a message. The victims spoke in a language of blood and bones, in words only Will Graham could understand, and with each victim Will was drawn ever deeper into the mystery of the man that killed for his attention. The case drew him further and further from himself, but more and more into the arms of an omega . . . an omega unlike any other. Will was losing himself, but Hannibal had found him.

- Inspired by Sleep Like Dead Men, Wake Up Like Dead Men by rosenritter

Chapter 1

Will was blinded.

The flashing lights penetrated every inch of space. They reflected from his windshield, while blue and white alternated in his mirror, and his eyes – stinging from the journey, fatigued from illness – struggled to focus in the ever-changing intensity and colours from the lights. He slowed his car to a crawl, as he struggled through the illuminated car-park. A stray space lay just ahead, while a uniformed officer signalled him into its lines, and soon he came to a stop.

He turned off the motor, while the lights only grew more intense. A camera flashed bright in a far corner, as an assistant piled artificial lights high around one specific squad car, and every other car in the parking-lot had its headlights on full-beam. It made the officers, investigators, and technicians seem pale . . . eerily ghost-like, as they bustled around like ants in a nest . . . even as his eyes struggled to focus, not one seemed distinguishable from the others. The sounds soon followed with a chaotic cacophony, as orders were barked and gossip commenced.

Will wiped the sweat from his brow.

He threw open the glove-box. He snatched out a small tub of aspirin, but paused with his hand midway to his coat-pocket, and – slowly unwrapping his fingers from plastic – looked with an unfocused gaze to see the tub blur and split into two moving equals. Will bit into his lip, before he shoved the bottle away and kicked shut the glove-box. He climbed out of the car and slammed shut the door, before he stumbled towards the squad car centre of the chaos. A raised hand shielded him from the worst of the lights, while the other played with the bottle in his pocket.

The squad car was parked centre of the underground car-park. It sat with doors flung wide, while a vague figure sat with its head resting on the headrest of the driving seat, and all around the other cars seemed to fan out around it, with their headlights all directed at its front. The dozens of other squad cars almost looked like a congregation in devotion of an icon, one taking central place of a holy site. Will stumbled closer. He cricked his neck, as a warm voice asked:

“Tough drive, huh?”

Beverly waved from the shadows. The white lab coat was at odds with her red blouse, while her hair and make-up seemed beyond the bounds of ‘professional’, like one disturbed from a party much like he was disturbed from his sleep. Beverly stopped a few feet from him, as her dark eyes glanced to the pill bottle in his hand. He shrugged. The smile on her lips faltered, in that way that made her eyes sharper and lips narrower; he averted his gaze and shrugged.

“Something like that,” muttered Will.

He popped the lid of the bottle, as he threw two pills into his mouth. He swallowed them dry, before shoving the bottle into his jacket pocket, and gratefully took a bottle of water from Beverly, which seemed hidden in her coat pocket in turn. Beverly said, as he chugged it down: *'it's like a sauna here, we've been sending some uniformed officer out on constant water runs, can't get it down fast enough'.* Will continued to drink. The bottle creaked and narrowed in its centre, until – finally – he pulled back his mouth for a huge gasps of air. Beverly asked:

"Dude, you sick or something?"

"I've had a bad week."

"Want to talk about it some?"

"Not really," said Will.

He handed back the near-empty bottle. Beverly stared at it within her hand, before she shoved it away with a shake of her head, and – as he panted and sweated – her fingers came out to pick at the dog hairs around the lapel of his jacket. He pushed his glasses further along his nose, as he glanced over her shoulder to the squad car that contained the victim. He squinted, until a pair of fingers clicked in front of his face, and his eyes snapped back to Beverly, who pressed the back of her hand and pulled it back with a frown. He shrugged, before he forced a smile.

"Well, clearly you've been around the dogs this morning," chirped Beverly. "That's got to have perked your mood up, right? I mean, it always makes me feel better . . . it's like being encased in warm and fuzzy hugs of love. You sure I can't adopt one? I could do with a pet."

"Sure, just remember that Winston is off-limits," laughed Will.

"That's good, because the little jack-terrier is so much cuter, anyway!"

"If you can give one a good home, I'm always grateful; lately everyone who comes to look at them is just . . . I don't know . . . I don't get good enough vibes from them. It doesn't help that my head's been all up in this Chesapeake Ripper case. I guess that's what this about? There's some body displayed in that car and Jack wants confirmation of the obvious?"

"Are you empathetic or psychic?" Beverly teased. "Zeller and Jack are busy over at the other entrance, but Price is just finishing up so they can take the body away. If you want to take a look at them, they're pretty much exactly as we found them . . . have at it, Will."

"You said 'them'? Is the victim non-binary, unidentifiable -?"

"The badge says it's one 'Joseph Williams', but . . ."

Beverly nodded to the crime and added:

"I'll be over here when you've seen for yourself."

Will furrowed his brow. Beverly blew a stray lock of hair from her face, as she placed her hands on her hips and stared towards the squad car, and – without any further information – Will walked with sluggish movements over to the waiting crime-scene. The doors were all thrown open, with various technicians swarming over every inch of the vehicle . . . *fingerprints, fibres, bodily fluids* . . . by the frowns and grunts, nothing seemed amiss. Jimmy examined the body from the driving-seat door, while he waved politely to Will without looking in his direction.

Will stopped on the opposite side, where he crouched before the passenger side. The body was dressed in full police uniform; the sleeves on one arm appeared a little shorter than the other, but otherwise there was little amiss and little unusual. Will looked through the car to Jimmy, who jotted down a few stray notes into his notepad. They locked eyes. Will raised an eyebrow and ran his hand over his face, as he gestured vaguely to the body in the driving seat. He asked:

"Jack called me here for a cop-killing?"

"See, I thought that at first, too."

Jimmy walked to his side. The faint scent of something earthy and musky drifted into his senses, not enough to distract, but enough to make him instinctively give space to Jimmy. He half-rose and looked quickly for Brian Zeller, but a pencil flicked hard at his forehead. Will frowned. Jimmy laughed and scooted a little closer, before he pointed with his pencil towards the neck of the victim, and encouraged Will to lean in for a better look; Jimmy struggled to balance and placed a gloved hand on the smallest area possible. Will kept his hands in his pockets.

"It's fascinating on a closer look, though," said Jimmy. "You see the line around the neck? It looks like our body was decapitated and had the head attached later . . . notice I said 'body' and not 'guy'? Well, the badge does belong to a Joseph Williams, but the only piece of this body that actually *belongs* to Mr Williams is the torso itself. It's fascinating, if not horrifying."

Will cast his eyes to the corpse. The line was barely visible above the collar, with the stitches thick and with a perfect symmetry all around the neck, and the professional quality could have made a fashion major weep with envious tears. The skin was bruised almost black around the edges, with blue and red and purple seeping back into various shades of white. He cast his eye down the body to the torso hidden behind the uniform . . . the arms . . . *the hands* . . .

The left hand was black in skin tone, with no sign of a cut or join. Will followed his eyes along the sleeve, where he noticed the huge muscles at odds with the slim right arm, which led to a pale hand of indeterminable ethnicity, and the legs followed a similar pattern. The one was thin enough that the sock wrinkled and fell about the ankle, where smooth skin was in stark contrast to the thick tuft of chest hair that poked from just beneath the collar of the shirt, and the other leg bore enough weight that the sock hid the entirety of the skin from sight.

"Six victims," whispered Will. "One body."

Will stood. He brought his hands before his mouth. The image of body parts . . . mixed-and-matched like a bag of sweets . . . bore itself into his retinas, until nothing else existed within the underground car-park aside from the glassy eyes of the corpse staring outward. A quickening of his heart caused a pulsing beat to echo in his ears, and a cold sweat broke over his flesh, so that each movement caused his shirt to peel away from his shoulders. Jimmy stood beside him. A soft touch to his upper-back helped balance him, as Jimmy continued with:

"There are also some organs missing."

"Which ones?"

"Well, I'd need to get him on the slab to tell you that." Jimmy whistled. "On a glance? I'd say looks like a kidney . . . I can *almost* certainly say that the intestines were left untouched, which seems to be the calling card of our Chesapeake Ripper, which is why I'm leaning to this being a separate killer. Brian's taking bets; I put twenty-dollars on this, so do right by me here, Will."

"Does Jack know that you're taking bets on cases?"

"I'm still breathing, right?"

"For now," teased Will.

"Beverly keeps saying it's why alphas and omegas shouldn't work together, because teasing leads to flirting and flirting leads to showing off . . . I still say that if Brian wants to 'play nice' to be chivalrous, then he kind of deserves to lose twenty-dollars. Who knows? Maybe I can put it towards a date, and – speaking of which – who picked that outfit out for you, hmm?"

Will gave him a hard stare. He looked over the rim of his glasses, as he lowered his head. Jimmy raised his hands in a gesture of surrender, before he took a few steps back, and whispered: '*I'll give you some time*'. Will stood still, as the footsteps drifted away back into the cacophony, and knelt down before the police vehicle. Time stopped. He gently closed his eyes. A series of deep breaths grounded him . . . shut out the noise and lights and movement . . .

The police cars would be gone. The underground car-park would be quiet; he would need the cover of darkness to work, when most people would not need their vehicles, and the 'body' would already be prepared, as there would be no time to stitch and sew on the scene. The police car would need to be empty and in position . . . a phony tip, luring the officers out . . . care would be taken to avoid cameras. The area would be familiar. It required speed, confidence, and a vehicle to move the body and flee the scene . . . the murders themselves were more complicated . . .

Will opened his eyes.

The figure of the stag-man was seated by the victim. It filled the entire vehicle with its presence, as the inky blackness somehow seemed to glow in the vast lights, and its antlers

pierced through the roof, while its head turned . . . slow, careful . . . it stared at him with black eyes. Will screamed. He fell backwards and scrambled back. He half-crawled and half-ran, but – when he stopped and turned – the creature was gone . . . *vanished*. He panted. He choked. The sweat ran down his neck and onto his back, as his eyes rapidly darted about the crime-scene.

Beverly and Jimmy stood beside him. They came as if out of nowhere. He jerked and trembled and groaned, while Beverly placed one hand on his shoulder and another on his arm, and Jimmy kept to the side with hands raised. The officers nearby were staring at him. He lowered his gaze and laughed through tears, as he wiped at his face and let loose a low sigh. Beverly guided him away from the vehicle, towards his car not far from them. Jimmy asked in a quiet voice:

"Will? Are you okay?"

"I – I saw –"

"Here, come sit down."

They led him to the hood of his vehicle. He perched on the edge, while Beverly tossed an empty bottle to a nearby uniformed officer, and – with a roll of his eyes – he tossed a full bottle back, which was quickly shoved into Will's trembling hands. The lid was undone by Jimmy, who gently guided the bottle to Will's lips. Will gulped down the liquid. It was cold down his scorching throat, but a refreshing comfort, and he pulled the half-empty bottle down between his legs, as he hunched forward and panted. Beverly rubbed at his back with soothing circles.

"It – It's not the same killer," choked Will.

"You sure, Will?" Beverly asked.

"I – I'm sure." Will winced. "The Chesapeake Ripper is a showman, sure, but he's never taken any organs and he's always focussed his attention on one victim at a time . . . one body, one statement . . . he also kills in batches of three, but this -? This is six kills at one time! This guy is taking organs, too . . . trophies, maybe? He took these people apart and stitched them back together, but the Ripper . . . he just *takes* and *takes* and *takes* . . ."

Will ran a hand over his face, before he continued:

"He turned one guy into a floral display. He made another guy into a cello. Why would he start reassembling his victims in this manner now? The fact that each *actual* victim here still has five body pieces missing -? Well, I think we're looking at another five displays. We need to work out the identity of the other victims. How did we know the torso was Williams?"

"We're still waiting on a DNA match," said Beverly. "But he has a tattoo on his stomach. It's like a sun thing around his belly-button? It's pretty corny, but something someone would have thought cool when they were in college, which is when his wife said he had it done."

“Okay, well, the left hand is wearing a wedding ring. It – It looks expensive, but also like it could be an heirloom or something . . . the right hand has a distinct scar . . . head should be easy with dentals and photo comparison . . . if the legs are anything like the rest, maybe they’ll have moles or marks or jewellery to help identify them. I’m guessing we have no cause of death?”

“Nothing with certainty yet,” said Jimmy.

“We – We’re going to have to wait for more victims for a pattern to emerge, but if he’s removing organs then I’d check as to the quality of work . . . this could be a butcher or a surgeon, someone with experience hacking flesh, and they’ll need their own property with space to hide six damned bodies. They’re probably single, as a spouse or significant other would notice the absences and probably the workspace for hacking and sewing, and they’ll need some strength, too.

“They’re strong enough to carry dead weight. I want to say male, probably between his twenties and forties, and he sees his victims as interchangeable . . . they’re all the same to him . . . they’re worthless, meaningless, just pieces and parts to swap around on a whim. Look into anyone that would have a grudge against Williams that fits the description.”

Will pulled out the aspirin bottle. He made to pop the cap, but Beverley slammed a hand over him and shook her head, as she whispered: *‘you’ve only just taken two’*. He blinked. He glanced to the bottle. A wince broke over his features, as he bit into his inner lip and shoved the bottle back out of sight, and avoided their gazes in favour of drinking more water. Jimmy sat beside Will on the hood, while Beverly stood with her hands folded across her chest. The light behind obscured her features and cast a long shadow over him. He rubbed at his neck.

“So,” said Jimmy. “We’re looking for a middle-class, middle-aged single male, one who owns property with space enough to store six bodies unnoticed, and could easily be a surgeon or butcher or even a fashion designer with his cutting and sewing skills. He’s either a young adult or middle-aged, with a grudge against the victims. Well . . . that narrows it down.”

“Wait,” added Beverly. “Do we have a dynamic? What is he?”

“Hard to say,” muttered Will. “The violence required to dismember six people suggests an alpha, but alphas also typically mutilate their victims like the Ripper, or dispose of them like trash or on the site of the murder itself. It could be a beta? It’s too early to tell.”

Will ran his hands over his shoulders. The tension was compounded by painful knots, enough that he dug his fingers into small mounds and tried to work them away, and the blinding lights started to leave painful afterimages, so that the faces of others grew distorted. He cast his gaze back to the crime scene. The body appeared to be in the process of being removed, while the crowd dispersed somewhat and other squad cars moved away, and – in time – the car-park would return to normal activity as if the horrors never existed. Will asked in a small voice:

“Any signs of sexual violence?”

“None that are obvious on a glance,” said Jimmy. “Like I said, I’d need to get our Frankenstein’s monster on the slab to find out more, but I kind of get the impression this is less a sexual deviant and more a . . . well . . . more an outright sociopath. Any thoughts?”

“No, at least no more than I already offered.”

“Well, I’m going to fill Jack in on what you said. He and Brian should be done about now, and – to be honest – these lights are giving me a blinding headache . . . no pun intended. It’ll be a relief to get outside and get some fresh air, maybe I can even sneak off for a bite to eat, and maybe keep it down away from all the sights and smells. I *so* should have picked a different career.”

Jimmy waved, as he walked away towards the second entrance. The vague sound of press clamouring for comments could be heard in the distance, where the police barricade would have to be carefully manned to avoid ‘leaks’ of the Lounds kind. Beverly sat beside him. A low sigh tumbled from her lips, as she nudged him with her shoulder. He continued to stare down. The ground below was marked with oil and stones and gum, with random patterns formed that stole his attention, and Beverly drew in a deep breath to ask in a quiet voice:

“Does Jack know, Will?”

“Know what?”

“That you’re in a pre-rut.”

Will crossed his arms over his stomach. He hunched forward, as he sought to hide in on himself. He rocked a little back and forth, while he pressed his legs around the bottle, and screwed shut his eyes until sparks of colour darted about his vision. Will counted to ten, before he reopened them and loosened his hold about his body. He released the tension. Beverly kept calm and impassive, even as he turned his head slowly towards her with a half-formed smile. A few words died on his lips, as he opened his mouth in search of words, before finally settling on a simple:

“How could you tell?”

“It’s a strong scent,” said Beverly. “I doubt Jimmy pays it much mind, being mated and all, but there’s something about it that puts me on edge . . . I swear, the one thing worse about being the one woman in an all boy’s club -? It’s being a single alpha around other alphas. I dread to think how Jack would be if anything ever happens to Bella, can you imagine?”

Will laughed. It was a sincere and gentle sound. He cast his eyes around for Jack, who still remained out of sight with Brian, and he chuckled to think of how much worse Jack could become, much like the old stereotypes yet to fully vanish. He kept the bottle of water between his legs, where each movement caused the plastic to crackle and pop with noises that broke through the comfortable quiet between them. Will shuffled. He looked to Beverly, before he winced and dropped his hands beneath his thighs, as he asked in a choked voice:

“Can I ask you something, Beverly?”

“Hmm? Sure, what’s up?”

“They say that ruts are spontaneous, but they can be triggered, right?” Will winced. “I heard that spending time with an omega can cause you to sync, at least if it’s a single and unmated omega, and . . . well . . . it can affect mood? You can become aggressive, moody . . .”

“No more than PMS in my experience,” joked Beverly.

“Well, do you get . . . I don’t know . . . I’ve had ruts my entire life, but I swear they’re so much worse recently, like the old stereotypes? I feel like I’m losing my mind; I keep losing track of time, I keep forgetting things I should remember . . . I feel more impulsive, too. I’ve done things I’ve regretted. I . . . I’m scared in case I end up like the killer that did this.”

“It sounds more like stress, Will. I mean . . . I know no two alphas are the same. You get alphas that totally eschew stereotypes, some that are attracted to other alphas, some that are exactly what you expect, but what you describe -?” Beverly shook her head. “It’s not a pre-rut.”

“So there’s something wrong with me?”

“I didn’t say that, Will.”

Beverly touched his upper arm. He jerked away, as he walked around to the driving side of his car, and opened wide the door with as much strength as he could muster. The aspirin and water were tossed onto the passenger seat, but – before he could enter – Beverly darted around and dropped her hand onto the top of the door. It would be impossible to close without breaking her fingers. He sighed and leaned against the roof, where he dropped his head into both hands, and rubbed his eyes with his fingers. Beverly removed her hand and asked in a whisper:

“Have you tried talking to Alana or Hannibal?”

“I think I alienated Alana by trying to kiss her.” Will groaned. “I also think I might have some feelings for Hannibal, but I’m not sure if I’m just desperately trying to cling to someone – *anyone* – out of a desire to be grounded or distracted. I mean, I can still talk to him, but . . . talking about pre-ruts and mental illness with someone you might like –?”

“Hey, if a guy sees all your crazy and still wants you around -?” Beverly smiled. “He’s a keeper, whether you remain friends or become something more. You need to talk to someone, though, but like . . . a proper doctor, you know? He deals with crazy for a living.”

“So he’ll know if this is ‘crazy’ or ‘hormonal’?”

“Pretty much,” said Beverly.

Will muttered a ‘thanks’, as he slid down into the driving seat. He kept the door open, even as he buckled up and reached into his pocket for the keys . . . *gone* . . . he fumbled around in increasing panic, before Beverly coughed and pointed to the ignition. Will froze. He slowly reached out with trembling fingers, before he took a hold of the keys and turned them. The

car came alive with an instant buzz of sound and sensations, and Will collapsed back into the seat with an audible swallow. Beverly gently closed the door behind him, as she said loudly:

“Just go home and rest up, Will.”

“Jack is going to go crazy.”

“I’ll explain you’re not feeling yourself, okay?” Beverly half-smiled. “You just go home and get some rest. I mean, most pre-ruts only last two week to four weeks, right? I’m pretty sure you’re owed a crap-ton of holidays, so maybe just take the time off, and just rest up.”

“Yeah . . . yeah, maybe . . . I’ll go home and rest, like you said.”

“Do you need someone to drive you back?”

“I’ll be fine,” said Will. “I promise.”

Will pulled back and pulled out of the car-park. The car bore a strange sweet scent, like caramel or something saccharine, and tears pricked at his eyes, as he struggled past the police and reporters to the outside world. He drove with little direction. The streets merged into one, until he ran in circles and flicked on the satellite navigation with a curse. Each beep helped slow his heartbeat. Each word helped cool the sweat. He focused only on the directions as he drove.

The pieces of the body remained imprinted on his mind . . .

Chapter 2

‘What do you see, Will?’

The waters were murky and deep. Coldness ran over his lower legs; the waters moved with a strange ebb and flow, and slowly moved higher and higher. The chilled moisture was refreshing against hot flesh . . . burning skin . . . his t-shirt clung to him with a sticky sweat. The trees rustled on either sides of the lake, with their branches shaking and shivering . . . leaves fell like rain, while he stepped ever deeper into the waters . . . waters that reached the hem of his boxers.

He lowered his head, where stars reflected back at him. A half-smile broke across his lips, as he raised trembling hands to brush back his brown locks of hair, and his eyes fell onto the surface of the water . . . black tendrils ran out from his lower limbs, like ink being trickled down onto a clean page of white parchment. It soaked into the waters. It spread. He stumbled back as the black clouds turned the lake into shadowy mist, before it become something impenetrable . . . there was no seeing what lay below the surface . . . no stars above . . .

‘Tell me what you see.’

The inky waters clung to him. They stained his flesh. He pulled at a leg, but the waters were thick like treacle, and the resistance pulled the limb back down into the lake, while the waters now reached his waist . . . he tried to turn . . . they pulled him back. The shore seemed further and further away, while the lights of the stars disappeared, and something appeared before him . . . centre of the horizon . . . a blurred silhouette of a figure, one not quite human and not quite animal. It bore skin as inky black as the lake. It bore antlers like a hunter’s home.

Will fought for breath, as the stag creature emerged like a god from the watery depths. It stood with firm footing on the waters, while it walked towards Will . . . slow, steady, serene . . . it walked an invisible line, while Will struggled and fought to get free. The water consumed his lower arms and abdomen. The bile burned at the back of his throat. Each breath was hitched and broken and choked, as his heart raced . . . pounded . . . deafening all other sounds . . .

‘Tell me, Will. Tell me!’

The water seeped to his chin . . . his mouth. The inky liquid filled his mouth, as the stag-man stood over him, casting him in further shadow, and it stood with no sign of mercy, while it stared down with impassive eyes at his immobilised form. He flared his nostrils with rapid and shallow breaths, until the waters filled each one . . . his eyes widened . . . water filled his mouth, until he could no longer swallow . . . choking and retching, he fought against his prison, while the stag creature smiled down. It smiled. The waters came higher, higher . . . the covered his eyes . . .

The world vanished . . .

* * *

. . . Will awoke with a start.

The sheets clung to his soaked flesh. The shirt stuck to him like a second-skin. It was still dark in the bedroom, with the ceiling above covered with dancing shadows and a strange silhouette, and his eyes struggled to focus on the figure, as he sought to make sense of reality. He twitched his fingers against the sheets, as he panted and gasped and sucked down every breath. The sensations slowly returned to his sweat-soaked arms. He rolled his head from side-to-side.

There was something cold against his forehead, while water trickled down into his brow, and – with a lazy and uncoordinated wave of his hand – he pushed away something wet and soft and loose from his forehead, which seemed attached to something warm and firm. The vision blurred. The shadowy silhouette shifted from one into two, as it separated and merged in rapid succession, and its arm was extended to his forehead, where it held a sponge or cloth. The liquid dripped like blood onto the mattress beside him. The antlers phased in and out of existence.

Will struggled to sit upright, as he pushed his hand at the stag creature. The chest was warm and firm, with something like soft fabric at his fingertips, and the black faded into a fashionable shade of blue, as a shirt drifted into his vision and covered the form. The antlers retreated. Will ran a hand through wet hair, while he furrowed his brow and looked over the human form beside his bed, and – with a staggered laugh – shook his head and dropped back. A voice whispered:

“It is only me, Will.”

Hannibal phased into existence. A gentle touch pressed itself to his back, while another – wet from the cold compress – guided his bare feet onto the ground. He slowed his breathing to a regular pace, as he focused his eyes onto the figure before him, and Hannibal smiled that handsome smile, one that always emphasised the lines about his face. It gave him a soft glow, with a subtle flush to his cheeks, and Will noted that he had forgone the jacket, leaving him only in a blue shirt with sleeves rolled over tight muscles and toned forearms.

“I – I’m sorry,” murmured Will. “I must have . . . I must have . . .”

“It’s okay, Will. Take your time.”

A firm arm wrapped around his waist. It guided him into a standing position, where it helped to keep him steady as he swayed where he stood, and slowly he was led through the lounge, as his feet slapped heavy against the wood with an irregular pace. He looked down. The footsteps of Hannibal were the perfect parallel lines of one that worked with purpose, while his footprints – sweat staining the floorboards – were erratic . . . right sometimes enough to be ‘left’. . .

He was led into the kitchen, until he reached a far counter. The sun streamed in through the windows, enough to bring a hiss from his clenched teeth, and he raised a hand to shield his eyes and turned his head away from the clear panes. Hannibal placed with him his back to the counter. He took Will’s hands and placed them on the edge, so that Will could hold onto it

with a loose grip, and gently placed the palm of his hand to a sweaty forehead, before he uttered a curse in a language unfamiliar to Will. Will pulled away the hand and muttered:

“Did I . . . Did I have a nightmare again?”

A low sigh fell from Hannibal’s lips. He planted a hand on Will’s shoulder, where he gave a firm squeeze, and moved along the counter to the stove. A flick of the switch brought the flame alive, as he filled a kettle and placed it on the ring to boil. Will stared ahead. In his peripheral vision, Hannibal busied himself with cups and spoons and jars. He moved with a speed and familiarity that made him a blur, until Will was forced to close him eyes and count to ten, and – when he reopened his eyes – time seemed to slow until Hannibal barely moved. Hannibal replied:

“I believe that ‘nightmare’ would be an understatement.”

“Yeah? What would you call it then?”

“A night terror would be more apt,” said Hannibal. “If I were to be honest, I would suggest that this was some sort of sleep paralysis combined with a nocturnal hallucination. There were points where your eyes were open and you seemed almost lucid. You spoke to me with some clarity, albeit there was some irony in that you said you could ‘see me’ for my real self.”

“I could ‘see you’? No . . . No, I didn’t see you. I saw . . . I thought . . .”

“What did you see, Will?”

Will flinched. He slowly turned his head to Hannibal, who stood with his hands wrapped around the ceramic of a patterned mug, and the steam exuded made his face shimmer, like distortions on water that disturbed the reflection of reality. Hannibal strode towards him. The mug was pushed into one of his hands, where the scent of tea drifted into his senses . . . *‘do you mind if I leave this here, Will? It would give me something to drink on my next visit’* . . . memories of laughter and arguments and shared breakfasts. Will brought the mug to his lips, as he muttered:

“It doesn’t matter what I saw.”

“I beg to differ. It clearly meant something to you, Will.”

Will rolled his eyes. He sipped at the tea, as he walked back into the lounge. The dogs scattered as he walked, some jumping with wagging tails and others slinking to their beds, and he took a seat in the leather of a soft armchair. He reclined with an audible sigh, while Hannibal sat opposite with his legs crossed at the knee. Hannibal sipped at his own mug in turn. There was a thick scent . . . rich and thick, like honey or caramel . . . Will shook his head, as he held the mug between parted legs and swirled the contents. He bit into his lip and shrugged.

“Why are you here?” Will asked.

“You missed our session last night,” said Hannibal. “You were also not responding to my calls this morning, which is unlike you . . . I thought it best to stop by and make sure that you were unharmed. It has been a trying few months, especially with Abigail due to be released, and I know that you have been losing time, worrying about your mental state. I was concerned, Will.”

“Oh? Concerned as my psychiatrist or as my friend?”

“I believe the answer to that is: ‘yes’.”

Will laughed. He sipped at the tea. It was hot and sweet, and he held it in his mouth for a few seconds, until he let it slide down his throat. The sensations grounded him, while something in the ingredients helped to bring him back to an alert state, and his vision finally focused, as he sank into the armchair and tilted back his head. A dog came before him, where it dropped down at his feet. Will smiled. He reached down to rub at the fur of its head, while its warm body proved a small comfort to his exposed lower legs, and he sipped again before whispering:

“I’m worried, Hannibal.”

“Oh? Why is that?”

“I’m worried, because the hospital is releasing Abigail into *our* care.” Will winced. “We’re down as her co-guardians, and Abigail is going to need a lot of time and attention . . . I *killed* her father, Hannibal! I still see his face in my dreams . . . sometimes even when I’m awake. What if I’m going crazy? What good will it do her to see me lose my mind? She’s already lost so much!”

“You are not losing your mind, Will.” Hannibal sighed. “I have seen many men lost in madness, but not one had the clarity or foresight to doubt their behaviours or thought processes. The main symptom of madness is that one believes their delusions. You do not.”

“There has to be something wrong with me . . . there *has* to be . . .”

“Do you not think that you are projecting? You come from a difficult background, abandoned by your mother and troubled by interpersonal relationships as one with a developmental disorder, and now you are expected to take on the responsibility of a young adult, one whose entire well-being rests in your hands. It is a difficult circumstance at the best of times, but it is possible that your fears are manifesting in such a way to trigger a ‘flight or fight’ response. I would suggest –”

“Stop,” said Will. “I do *not* appreciate being psychoanalysed. This is nothing – *nothing* – to do with my goddamned so-called abandonment issues, and *everything* to do with the fact that my job requires me to go into the minds of serial killers and . . . I don’t know . . . rifle around like a thief in the night looking for a quick score. I don’t know where I start and end!”

“Perhaps what you need is clarity,” said Hannibal.

Will grunted, as he put his mug down. It rested not far from his legs, enough that the dog caught its scent, and – with a roll of its body – the dog scrambled to its feet and lapped at the liquid. Hannibal hissed. He dropped his mug onto the windowsill. A soft blush broke over Will's cheeks, as he scratched at his neck and muttered an apology, before he took the half-empty mug from the dog and placed it on the windowsill in turn. He followed by running his hands over his face, before dropping forward and resting his arms on his knees. He stared hard at Hannibal.

"I feel like the Chesapeake Ripper is so close that I can taste him," spat Will. "I know that Jack is depending on me, but I just look at the crime scenes and I -! I don't know . . . maybe what I need is to see a negative of the crime to get an appreciation of the Technicolor piece."

"So is the Ripper the problem or Garret Jacob Hobbs?"

"Who knows? Either? Neither?" Will shrugged. "I just know that it used to be I was scared to sleep, and then I was scared to close my eyes, and now I'm just . . . *scared*. If it wasn't for you, I don't think I'd have any anchor to reality. Do you know what it's like to not be safe anywhere? No, that's not it . . . it's not knowing if you're safe for others . . ."

Will climbed to his feet. He walked with sluggish movements back to the kitchen, where he snatched at an old cloth and ran it beneath the faucet, and – with a groan – ran it over his face and limbs in what his father used to call 'a whore's bath'. He avoided his vital regions for modesty, while Hannibal made loud comments on a shower being more hygienic than a quick once-over in a kitchen sink, but Will failed to hear the words . . . the rich and sweet scent returned, until realisation dawned on Will: it wasn't the tea. He asked in a low voice:

"What's that smell, anyway?"

Hannibal blushed. He stood beside Will, but kept his distance by several feet. A small pile of clothes sat in his hands, which were placed on the clean countertop, and Will furrowed his brow, as he strove to search his memory for when Hannibal sorted out an outfit or when he carried them through from wherever they were stored. The clothes were picked with more care than he would usually give an outfit, with even the socks and underwear picked to match an overall colour scheme and complement the other items. Will furrowed his brow, as Hannibal said:

"We have been spending a great deal of time together, Will."

"So what? You're trying to impress me with expensive cologne, is that it?"

"On the contrary," said Hannibal. "You have entered a pre-rut, Will. It may just be for a few weeks every six months, but it is not unusual for pre-ruts to trigger pre-heats and for eventual ruts and heats to synchronise . . . at least between single people without bonds."

"Oh." Realisation dawned. "*Oh*!"

Will fumbled with the wet cloth. It fell out of his hands, where it landed with a splat. He bent down and mumbled a series of half-aborted apologies, while his words stopped and started in his throat, and – returning the cloth to the draining-board – he walked towards the pile of

clothes. Hannibal stepped away, so that his scent grew fainter with the distance. He turned so that Will could quickly change his shorts and vest, before a quiet '*I'm decent'* allowed Hannibal to turn around, as Will continued to add the rest of his clothes to his outfit.

"Sorry," muttered Will. "It's easy to forget you're an omega."

"I am not sure whether to be insulted or complimented."

"I didn't mean it as either one." Will shrugged. "It's just that I grew up with a beta father, so what I learned about dynamics came from the media . . . you expect an omega to be emotional, vulnerable, and in need of a big and strong alpha to look after them. They go all insane in a heat, just desperate to be filled like a bitch in season, and are controlled by their emotions."

"A stereotype often applied to women in the past."

"Hmm, maybe that's why it irks me so much. I dislike the sexist connotations, but I also dislike that society still hasn't really progressed in the prejudices against such dynamics . . . I was in the locker room at work once, where one cop was bragging about banging some omega woman, and he was actually *impressed* when she knelt forward and presented herself to him. I always thought it was just some porn thing, that submissive crap, but clearly she felt pressured to do it."

"Why pressured? Is it not possible to simply enjoy being submissive?"

"I mean . . . I guess? Maybe?" Will shook his head. "I just can't fathom *being* vulnerable, you know? The idea of exposing my back, neck, *behind* . . . not even just sexually, but generally, how am I meant to expose my thoughts and feelings and *self* to someone? I've seen what that kind of trust does to a person. It's why I don't get omegas. It's so irrational."

Hannibal flared his nostrils. He took the shirt from the last of the pile, which he unfolded and held forward in a sign of invitation, and Will – with a blush and lowered head – turned his back to Hannibal and slid his arms through the holes, before he turned again and watched deft hands quickly button he shirt from top to bottom. Will tucked in the shirt, while Hannibal threw a tie around his neck and tied it into a knot beyond Will's skill. He blushed and donned the jacket last, before he leaned back against the countertop and breathed deep the sweet scent.

"You opened yourself up to me," said Hannibal. "Is this not a form of trust? I fear you forget my dynamic due to my refusal to adhere to strict stereotypes, and that frightens me . . . if I were to show you vulnerability, or choose to be submissive, would you dismiss me as a weak omega?"

"Of course not!"

"Needless to say, it was not my intent to disturb you with my scent. I do not find your scent unpleasant, and I honestly feel honoured that you would choose to spend your time in my presence, enough that we have begun to synchronise, as has occurred. Even if you do not 'get' me, my intention was only to check on your well-being. I care for you, Will."

Will tugged at his collar, as his cheeks turned red. He mumbled a series of incoherent sounds, before he strode into the lounge and picked up his phone, and – seeing no messages – shoved it into the pocket of his trousers, ruining the line with its presence. Hannibal lingered in the archway between rooms, while several dogs followed Will fast on his heels. He knelt down with a smile to fuss them, causing some to jump at him and others to lick at him, and his laughter fell fast and relaxed from his mouth, while Hannibal smiled from across the room and asked:

"Do you wish to discuss something more professional?"

"I'd rather not, no," muttered Will. "Did Alana tell you that I kissed her? I broke all professional boundaries looking for . . . *fuck* . . . I don't even know what! I've been hearing things, seeing things . . . I'm ruining my relationships with my friends . . . how many times have I imposed on you like now? I'm just *clinging* to stability wherever I can find it. I'm . . . I'm scared . . .

"I'm scared that if I get close to you, that I'll want to get closer, and I'll ruin whatever is between us like I ruined it with Alana . . . even worse, I might drag you into my madness. Isn't there a French word for that? Like madness shared between two people? I'm so sick of 'professional' . . . what even *is* professional? I spend day after day after day staring at corpses . . . *oh, look, this one is sitting opposite himself on a school bus, and this one's chopped up like a cello*!"

"Oh? A cello?"

"Yeah, didn't I tell you about the Ripper's latest kill?"

"No, you did not." Hannibal hummed. "I will admit that the brass section of the Baltimore Philharmonic Orchestra has been a little underwhelming lately, but I had no complaints of its cellists. Do you know that they get all their strings from one Tobias Budge? It is said that he uses cat gut, which produces the most authentic sounds. I have always been fascinated by how the intestines fuel an instrument much like how the lungs fuel our voices."

Will smiled. He unbuttoned his jacket, before he tossed it onto the chair. The scent was strong, even from the distance and among the animals, and his eyes ran over Hannibal with a cursory movement, as he dropped down onto the leather armchair again. He gestured absently to the opposite chair, while he cricked his neck and rolled his head. Hannibal sat before him. The silence between them was broken by the ticking clock, along with pants and whines from the dogs, and Will noticed that they had already been fed, as their bowls sat out half-full. He asked:

"Do you have work today?"

"You are aware today is Sunday, yes?"

The smile fell from Will, as he cast his eye to the desk-calendar. It was difficult to see from the distance, but he could vaguely make out the date and the word: 'Fri'. He pulled out his phone from his pocket. The date was different and the day was 'Sunday'. A cold sweat broke over him, like ice-cold water poured slowly over hot flesh, and his mouth ran dry with his

tongue thick and heavy against his teeth. The laugh from his lips was hissed and broken, while tears pricked at his eyes and distorted his vision. He dropped his hand and phone between his legs.

“I really am losing my mind,” whispered Will.

“If you do not think it to improper, I would be happy to stay for a while.” Hannibal smiled. “I do not subscribe to the opinion that alphas cannot control their ruts, obliged to mate whatever omega is in sight, and . . . well . . . you are a good friend, Will. I would worry to leave you alone in this state, especially when a good home-cooked meal will help ease your stress.”

“Is that your professional opinion? A dinner with a friend to fix my issues?”

“You have tried my cooking, yes? I can assure you that it will certainly lift your mood.”

Will laughed again, as he wiped at his eyes and sniffed. The mention of a breakfast made his mouth water, while his head continued to spin with a light-headed hunger, and he gazed into the kitchen, as he bit into his lip and tapped his fingers on the armchair. He smiled and opened his mouth to speak, but the words failed to make their way past his lips. The phone buzzed in his hand. He winced and brought it upward, where the familiar name flashed on the screen in time to the buzzing sound, and he looked to Hannibal with a half-smile and half-lidded eyes.

“It’s Jack,” said Will. “I have to take this.”

He stood and slid closer to the bedroom, where he kept his back to Hannibal, and pressed the phone to his ear, only to yank it back when a shouted voice screamed with great speed, enough that he stumbled and grabbed at the wall for support. The last words he heard were: *‘Get here now, Will’!* The phone call ended abruptly, enough that Will was left staring at the screen, as a text message came through with an address, and he dropped his whole weight against the wall, while he ran a hand through his mussed locks of hair. Hannibal stood.

He walked over to the armchair and retrieved the jacket. It was held out towards Will, much like with the shirt earlier, and – with only a momentary pause – Will slid on the jacket and muttered a ‘thank you’, before he darted to the front door. He tripped over the dogs and waved towards Hannibal, before he finally stopped with his hand on the doorknob. Will looked over his shoulder. The smile faltered and his eyes dropped low, and he choked out in a quiet voice:

“I’ve got to go, it’s a work thing.”

“I understand, Will. Do what you must, I’ll be waiting . . .”

Chapter 3

“I apologise for the short-notice.”

Hannibal smiled, as he sat on the soft chair. He smoothed out the creases of his trousers, before he crossed his legs at the knee and folded his hands upon his lap, and – with eyes fixed forward – waited for Bedelia to take her place opposite him. The floor-to-ceiling windows were freed from the curtains, where they let in a vast deal of light and illuminated her office. The trees outside wafted their branches in the breeze. They cast long shadows within the office.

The fresh flowers on the glass table let loose a light scent. He breathed deep, where he caught the faint aroma of her perfume as she walked by his chair. It took time for her to seat herself opposite him, with her back to the windows, and her body language mirrored his in turn, as she crossed her legs and clasped her hands within her lap. A ticking of a clock echoed out from the adjacent room, while her each breath was almost audible, so that – with his eyes half-closed – he could almost picture the rise and fall of her chest against the soft silk of her blouse.

“You are my sole patient,” said Bedelia. “It would be rude to fail to accommodate your schedule, and remiss to deny you when you are in need of support. I suspect that I already know what has triggered this appointment ahead of schedule, but perhaps it would be better to hear the reason in your own words?” Bedelia smiled. “What has brought you here, Hannibal?”

The curl to her blonde hair caught at her throat. It hid well the signs of age that were inevitable with time, but contained a youthful bounce to prove deceptive to a less well-trained gaze. The slight lean to her body brought attention to her discomfort, as if seeking to move away from him, and the light behind her cast dark shadows about her face. He continued to smile. He cocked his head and ran his eyes over her, before he locked gazes and nodded. It was a polite and friendly gesture, one barely reciprocated, and he drew in a deep breath to say warmly:

“I have been spending more time with Will Graham.”

“I see,” said Bedelia. “I believe we spoke about this in our last session.”

“Indeed, we did.” Hannibal smirked and shrugged. “You suggested that my relationship with Will was inappropriate; I believe that you suggested a man removed from the concept of friendship was incapable of providing friendship to another man also removed from the concept. I thought about what you said, but – well – I believe perhaps Will and I can learn together.”

“Did you come here seeking advice or validation?”

Hannibal sighed and said: “Do you know that Sartre once suggested we seek advice from those that enable our desire to hear what we wish to hear? He claimed that we know what to

expect from any given person, thus we know what they will say in response, and that our plea for guidance is simply an act of a person seeking a form of validation. It is oddly beneficial to our personal agenda, as we know what shall be said from the start. We hear what we wish to hear."

"Do you wish for me to tell you to keep your distance?"

"I wish to continue our session on the same page." Hannibal picked at his cuffs. "I know that you must offer advice with a professional distance, just as you must know that I do not have many friends and would do what I must to keep them in my life. I would do anything to protect Will, which is why I am here . . . I am concerned that I may be losing him on some level."

Hannibal schooled his expression into a frown. He lowered his gaze. The shine on her heel drew his attention, as he rapidly blinked and drew in a hissed breath, and – with a staggered exhale – he slowly lifted his head and forced a smile. Bedelia remained impassive. There was no change to her expression, no movement to her body, and she watched every subtle micro-expression. The smile brightened, as he straightened his back and lifted his chin high. A low hum fell from his lips. Bedelia took in a deep breath, before saying in a low voice:

"Why do you feel that you are losing your hold on Will Graham?"

"I caught a new scent on him recently," said Hannibal. "It had heat. A fevered sweetness. It is a rather unique scent, one often associated with omegas in pre-heat or heat, but with the unique strength that can only come from an alpha. I have asked him to draw me a clock, merely as a grounding exercise, and to state aloud the time, date, and location of his person."

"What is the connection between the clock and the scent?"

"What could such a scent suggest? It is possible that it could be a hormonal imbalance, an autoimmune disorder, or simply a fever brought on by a virus . . . one would naturally assume a hormonal imbalance, aggravated by a pre-rut, and thus it is not an urgent matter. I will advise him to seek help after his rut, with checks upon his hormone levels, and – in the meantime – I think simple grounding exercises are a suitable coping mechanism for the feelings of loss of self."

The wind picked up outside. It blew the branches against the windows, where they scratched and tapped in an irregular rhythm, and they moved as if in a strange dance with the breeze. A howling noise drowned out the distant ticking, while a spray of water appeared on the glass. The world outside grew distorted. The skies grew grey above, so that the light was all but eradicated, and Hannibal tilted his head to watch the fall of rain. He lowered his gaze back to Bedelia, who centred her position and unfolded her legs, before she leaned forward to ask:

"Are you acting as Will Graham's friend or as his psychiatrist?"

"I never assumed an official role as his psychiatrist."

"Yet you would diagnose him with a 'hormonal imbalance', and suggest a treatment of simple cognitive exercises to alleviate the distress he experiences from his behavioural

changes?" Bedelia half-smiled and tilted her head. "An unusual action from a mere friend."

"Is it not normal to wish to see your friends whole?"

"It is normal to wish to help one's friends, yes, but the desire to help is usually borne from a selfless desire to see the other party flourish, even if time passes and distances grows . . . I still consider friends many men and women that I have not seen for some decades. Is your desire to help Will for his benefit or yours? You are close enough to have synced your cycles."

"I am not so selfless as to be willing to let a friend leave, no."

"Is it safe to say that your desire to 'make Will whole' is more . . . selfish?" Bedelia leaned back. "I remember once you mentioning the art of *kintsugi*, where broken objects are pieced together to be whole once more, and the cracks and joins are celebrated as marking a history of its long life, transforming it from a commonplace item into a unique work of art.

"There is some sense of accomplishment when we mould and shape another . . . teachers, psychiatrists, parents . . . we all see the final artwork, which we helped piece together, and every time we look at that person and see the cracks -? We feel that pride to be reminded of our part."

"Do you think I mean to shape Will into my image?"

"I believe you mean for Will to *reflect* your image back at you."

Hannibal smiled. He drummed his fingers once upon his knuckles. The various scents within the office were strong and suffocating to the senses, with the pollen and perfumes mingling with products and paints, and his nostrils flared to catch a wave of her natural scent. He moved his eyes to the artwork behind her, which lay between two of the main windows. The brick wall proved an interesting focal point, but again her eyes never wavered. He met her gaze again. The wind picked up speed, as the rain lashed at the windows, and the sky turned black.

"A broken mirror," said Hannibal.

"A unique mirror that no other has possessed," replied Bedelia. "One that reflects back only what you wish to see; one in which you can admire yourself *and* your artistic hand in its recreation. It is as I said, a man removed from friendship will always fail to understand its concept."

"If I am removed from the concept, am I to never have friends?"

"Are you purposely deflecting from the point?"

Hannibal hummed. He slowly stood, before he clasped his hands behind his back. A series of slow and steady steps took him around Bedelia, where he brushed his hand against the edge of her chair, and walked around the room to stand before the artwork on the brick wall. It was different from the other pieces. The piece was a minimalist depiction of woodland, at odds

with the more intricate Bedelia remained seated, with her eyes locked on his empty seat, and he smiled as he looked over his shoulder, as he stared at the back of her head. Bedelia asked:

“Does Will’s illness fascinate you?”

“I have never met someone before with such a high degree of empathy,” confessed Hannibal. “It is as if he is able to perfectly assume the position of any person, and yet he is very likely on the spectrum, which makes such affective empathy an unusual trait. I feel as if he understands me on a level that no other has come close to before, and – more than that – I *want* him to see me.”

“You want him to see past the façade,” observed Bedelia. “Do you consider that merely removing the mask you wear would allow him best to see your true self? There is something to be said about allowing oneself to be vulnerable and exposed to another.”

“Is it not better to be seen despite the mask? I feel there is something remarkable at someone breaching your defences, as they see something no one else in the world can see, and knowing that they alone have earned the privilege of you *then* lowering your defences. If you expose your true self to every person, does it not then become a meaningless gesture?”

“Another psychiatrist might suggest you fear rejection.”

“Another psychiatrist would not know better.”

Hannibal continued to watch Bedelia. There was no sign of acknowledgement, as she continued to sit with perfect posture, and a slight breeze caught at her blond locks, causing them to move just slightly as if brushed with an invisible hand. He walked back behind her. He paused. There was nothing but the gentle sound of her breath, along with the scent of her perfume, and – with a slight smirk – he continued to his seat, where he brushed down the creases of his trousers. A low exhale fell from Bedelia, as she leaned forward half-perched upon her seat.

“We all come to an age where we desire for a partner,” whispered Bedelia. “We come to face our mortality and wonder as to our legacy, and many people will strive for a façade of ‘normality’ in which to blend in with society. It makes movement easier in a world that watches our every movement. We may claim that it is for ‘love’, but for many of us it is . . . fear.”

“I do not fear being alone,” said Hannibal.

“But you will admit there would be benefits to claiming a mate? It eases the loneliness, as well as allows you to create a child in which to leave behind said legacy, and it would appease those that would lay expectations upon you, by adhering to societal beliefs in regards to dynamic. It may even allow for a grand social occasion, or help ease social mobility, as many people feel more comfortable around couples than single persons. You do love to be social.

“You already have a ‘child’ with Will, do you not? It could be said that Abigail is a surrogate daughter to you both, with you both being named as her legal guardians, and you have often

described yourself as one of her ‘fathers’. The only issue is that she is fully formed, made in the image of the man that raised her, and while there is still time to imprint upon her -?”

“She may never be ours and ours alone.”

“Correct.” Bedelia nodded. “It is likely this will lead Will to view Abigail as the daughter of Garret Jacob Hobbs, with himself merely as her guardian, and – while he will grow close to her, love her, even feel paternal towards her – there will come a respectful distance, much like a teacher affords to a student or a relative affords to a child. Abigail may link you together, but it is not a *permanent* link or bond, for the reality is that she can never be your shared child.”

Bedelia stood and walked towards the desk. The decanter sat on its polished surface, beside two glasses that sparkled even in the overcast darkness, and Bedelia took the decanter in hand, as she poured one glass full of a red wine that let loose a heady scent. Hannibal took a handkerchief from his pocket. The fabric was brought to his mouth, as he disguised a deep exhale, and the cologne dabbed onto the fabric drowned out the multitude of other aromas that invaded his senses. He slowly stood and returned the handkerchief to his pocket.

“Abigail is a shared responsibility,” said Hannibal.

“You see her as your daughter, but Will sees her more as a charge,” continued Bedelia. “If you seek to perhaps evolve your friendship with Will into something . . . shall we say ‘*more*’? . . . I fear that you may have realised Abigail is not the tether you once believed. Will has expressed a desire to be a parent on several occasions, has he not? A child would be a strong tether, one that would be unbreakable and permanent in nature. It could secure you the mate you desire.”

“You make it sound as if I have an agenda.”

“Will identifies very strongly as a heterosexual male, and – while we can both agree sexuality can be fluid – it takes *time* to come to terms with one’s sexuality and accept any changes to one’s predilections . . . time you do not have an as omega. The child-bearing age for an alpha ends in their thirties, for a beta this ends in their forties, and for an omega it ends in their fifties. You are coming close to leaving your forties, Hannibal. Your fertility will be affected.”

“Only if I wish to bear a child, as opposed to seeding a child.”

“You once mentioned that Will longed for a family; a sense of a purpose, a place to belong. The *idea* of a daughter was enough for him to grow hopeful, while the idea of losing that same daughter was enough to invoke despair. He fears losing what he never thought possible, enough that it pushes him away from Abigail. What would happen were you to share a child, I wonder?”

“Who could say?” Hannibal asked. “He was abandoned by his mother as a young child, enough that this trauma has etched itself onto his mind and influenced all relationships since, and I know he would never turn his back upon a child. He would see that as a terrible sin.”

“One act. One child. One mate,” said Bedelia.

“You speak as if I am already pregnant with his child.”

“You may as well be,” said Bedelia.

Bedelia lifted her glass in mock salute. He came to stand beside her, while she sipped at the wine with half-closed eyes and an audible sigh, and – as she slowly lowered her glass – her eyes fell on him and her mouth quirked into a half-smirk. The empty glass was slid in his direction. He came towards her and placed his hand flat on the desk, and his finger touched lightly on the stem of the fine wine-glass. He took in a deep breath. He pushed the glass back. A smile broke over him, as he took his jacked from the chair and pulled it back on. He said in a warm voice:

“I think I will forgo our usual glass of wine this one time.”

“It is important to keep a good hormonal balance,” said Bedelia. “I shall assume that you will arrive as expected at our next scheduled appointment? I shall not point out the obvious that you are in a pre-heat, but I will ask you to observe the timing with some care.”

“I can assure you that I will be *very* careful of my pre-heat.”

“Of that, I have no doubt,” whispered Bedelia.

He said nothing, but merely nodded. Bedelia half-waved to him, as he saw himself out of her home, and outside the rain lashed against his face, bringing with it a comforting touch as it broke the light fever that accompanied the pre-heat. He tilted back his head and let the water run down his face and seep into his clothes, before he finally made his way towards his car and clicked open the door with a press of a button. He slid into the driving seat. He sighed.

The rain hammered down on the roof above; Hannibal ran a hand through his hair to keep it out of his face, while his other and flicked on the ignition and slid his phone into the hands-free set, before he flicked through the various names on the electronic display. He flicked through to the simple and short name: Will. Hannibal smiled. He adjusted his seat-belt and straightened upright, and quickly checked the time on his watch . . . *Will would be off work, likely on his way to visit Abigail* . . . Hannibal pressed the button and waited for the inevitable voice.

The ring went on for some time, until it eventually trailed off into silence. He hung up before a message could be left, and stared back towards the house before him, as he took in a deep hissed breath and narrowed his gaze. He jabbed at the buttons and swiped with a quick gesture. The fingers on his other hand drummed out a rhythmic pattern on the arm-rest, until the phone eventually clicked through and a voice grumbled out in a low voice:

‘Hello? Is this you?’

“This is Hannibal, yes,” said Hannibal. “It just occurred to me that Abigail is not long due to be released from hospital, and I thought it would be good for you to spend some time with her in a one-on-one capacity, so as to help ease the transition. If we can cement a solid

support base, as well as expose her to more of the real world, it may be easier for her to adjust."

'Er, sure, I guess. I mean . . . I don't know . . . I killed her father, Hannibal. The last year has been chaotic and crazy and I don't want to step on any toes. I know she didn't have the best father, but he was still her father, you know? What kind of stuff did you have in mind?'

"I know you enjoy fishing, but I have also recently made an acquaintance that is willing to provide violin lessons, and music has wonderfully cathartic properties. It is an expression of self, as well as a language able to transcend speech in all forms. We are her fathers now, so it is up to us alone to ready her for the outside world and secure her emotional stability."

'I . . . I actually bought her a present. I thought it'd help.'

"Did she appreciate the gesture?"

'I don't know. I left it in your office, it just felt wrong. I can't -!'

The noises on the other end were muffled. A series of footsteps half-muted, with the telltale whistling of wind that spoke of one in the general area, and panted breaths that made the phone-line crackle and break like static. The sound of a metronome echoed out beyond all other sounds, followed by the thump of a body on leather . . . a armchair, perhaps . . . no, the squeak spoke of an office-chair, while the flip of papers detailed a desk. Hannibal half-closed his eyes with a sigh, as he asked in a calm and clear voice the simple question:

"Are you still in my office?"

'I was angry when I bought it. I shouldn't have bought it.' Will laughed. *'I feel like I'm losing my mind; I brought her lures and a magnifying glass, like . . . like I could just teach how to fish, like how her father taught her how to hunt. I just wanted to share something with her, though. I just thought . . . well, clearly I wasn't thinking, was I? Alana advised me not to get too invested.'*

"Alana suspects that you have paternal feelings for Abigail."

'Don't you?'

"I do," said Hannibal. "It is why fishing could be a good idea. It is something good to erase the something bad, but . . . if you are uncertain -? I still maintain musical lessons could be a neutral alternative with no overt connotations or ulterior motivations. Where are you, Will?"

'I always wanted a family. You want what you never had, don't you?'

"You have a family, Will. You have me. You have Abigail."

'I've got to go. I'll see you later, okay?'

The line went dead. Hannibal stared at the screen, until it fell black. He took in a deep breath, while he pulled the car out onto the road, and – as he drove – he counted the seconds until three minutes had passed. He tried the number again. The line rang out until an automated

voice explained that the person could not be reached in a saccharine tone, leaving him once again to the sound only of raindrops and wind. He drove with a steady speed back to the city.

Despite the silence, he tried once more with the phone . . .

The line was dead.

Chapter 4

“Will, are you quite alright?”

The door slammed behind Hannibal. It echoed about the large office, as he tossed his coat onto a wooden chair, and the cream-and-red curtains fluttered at the far side of the room, where a breeze came through the open window of the one that lay far right. The rain lashed against the panes of glass, while the netting billowed out and shrouded Will where he stood. A thick scent of an inevitable rut lay heavy between them. Hannibal strove to take shallow breaths.

He stopped just short of Will, who bore a thin sheen of sweat. The blue eyes were dilated, with visible bags from sleepless nights beneath them, and the skin of his cheeks was sallow and sunken with a lack of nutrition. Hannibal flared his nostrils. He brought a hand to Will’s forehead, where the other cupped his neck for a comparison point, and Will jerked away with a sluggish pull of his upper torso. Hannibal grabbed at his upper arms, as he fixed him in place and locked eyes with a firm stare. Will wilted. The shoulders slumped.

“He’s not sick,” called a voice. “I think he’s just tired.”

Hannibal let loose his grip, as he turned to the two armchairs centre of the office. Abigail sat neatly perched on the edge of the leather, with a smile half-broken across her pale expression, and the bright coloured scarf about her neck seemed at odds with her complexion. The long locks of brown hair fell loose about her face. They shadowed her eyes and drew attention away from the neck, while she fidgeted with her hands within her lap, and Hannibal – with a broad smile and slow nod – gently guided Will over in her direction towards the *chaise longue*.

He sat Will on the fabric, before removing Will’s coat. It was dropped beside him, before Hannibal again touched and fretted about his face, and – with a low sigh walked around the second armchair towards his desk. The rain continued to pound against the panes, with a relaxing rhythm at odds with Will’s hunched position and fatigued expression. He brushed his fingers on the polished wood. Abigail remained quiet, while a heavy sigh fell from Will.

“I’m fine,” scoffed Will. “Why wouldn’t I be?”

“I called you from the car,” said Hannibal. “I was concerned as you seemed to be in a panic, and you would not then answer my calls once the conversation had ended. I did not expect to find Abigail with you, Will. Did you collect her after or before our conversation?”

“‘Conversation’? What conversation? I didn’t call you.”

“Do you honestly not remember what was said?”

Hannibal noted the papers on his desk. The sketches were disturbed, with most jotted lazily in free moments and previously stowed into a folder out of sight, and yet they sat about the table in an almost perfect fan-shape with the contents on full display. The artworks were

varied in nature . . . *the Eiffel tower beside the public park, the exterior of a manor house* . . . centre of everything – with prominent focus – was the complete figure of a nude man from the rear, with dark curls of hair hiding the face. A series of half-formed notes were etched onto the side.

The notes existed in a short bullet list . . . *'for each stage go as far as you can', 'within their own rules', 'watch out when moving on to the next'* . . . the final two points read: *'review previous stage for 15-30 minutes'* and *'use over lapping measuring system; look for p.e shapes'*. He cast a quick eye over to Will, before he slid the paper away and pulled open his desk drawer. A wrapped gift lay inside. The tag was addressed to Abigail. Hannibal said in a firm voice:

"If you did not call me, there is no harm checking your call history."

Hannibal slid the artwork face-down beneath the present. The drawer closed with a soft click, as the vast array of other sketches remained sprawled out upon his desk, and Hannibal walked toward the armchair opposite Abigail and beside Will. He crossed his legs toward Will, while he smoothed down his trouser legs and sat in the exact place of his patients. A box of tissues sat on the glass table beside him. He drew in a deep breath and held it for several seconds, until he allowed himself a slow exhale and found enough patience to say in a warm tone:

"It is good to see you here, Abigail."

"Thanks," said Abigail. "I wish I could say it's good to be here, but things are still so . . . is 'difficult' the right word? I feel like I have no right to complain after what those girls went through, but I just . . . I keep going back to that night . . . I keep thinking about what was taken from me, and I know it's selfish, but I really had huge hopes for the future."

"You still have a bright future ahead of you, I promise you that."

"Do I? I mean, I own *nothing* except what I took from my house. I've got some clothes and photo albums and stuff, but that's it . . . Freddie told me that the families of the victims have put in a lawsuit . . . I might not even have my house . . . no home . . ." Abigail winced. "I'll have to start with nothing from scratch. What future can I have living like that?"

"That's a problem for another day," muttered Will.

"Indeed, we shall not see you on the streets," added Hannibal. "We are your guardians, Abigail. I would happily offer my home to you, should you need a place to stay outside of the hospital, and perhaps we can work on getting you into a good college. This would afford you time to save and plan for a permanent place that you could call your own. I ask that you think on such an offer."

"I'm grateful . . . I *am* . . . it's just that it shouldn't be on you to replace what my dad took from me, and even then -! I feel . . . I feel guilty getting a second chance and your help, because it's not like Marissa or the others can just get a 'do-over' is it? It's not fair . . ."

"No, but what happened to the others is not your fault."

“No? It *feels* like it’s my fault,” she choked.

Abigail pulled at his scarf. It pulled back enough to reveal the edge of the scar, before a quick retying of the knot hid away the damaged skin. Will leaned back, with his hands on the edge of the *longue*, and furrowed his brow on sight of her pursed lips and narrowed eyes. There was pain in her expression. A slight tremble to her fingers betrayed the emotion that she strove to keep away from her face; it pushed Will to place all his weight onto one hand, while the other ran over his face and pulled at his mouth and beard. Will looked to Hannibal and smiled.

“I offered to take Abigail fishing,” said Will.

“Oh?” Hannibal asked. “What put that idea into your head?”

“I don’t know. I was driving to the hospital to pick Abigail up, and it just came to me . . . like when you wake from a dream and half-remember some distant words. I was surprised when Abigail agreed, but there’s a lake that I know . . . not far from here . . . I see it in my dreams sometimes, and I need an excuse to test some of my new lures.”

“He’s going to teach me how to make some lures, too,” said Abigail.

“It’s something my father once taught me. I remember we’d move around every season to find work, but we’d always be near water . . . we’d sit and make lures, work on boat-motors, read all about the different types of fish . . . my last memory of him was fishing on a pier, legs dangling down into the waters below. I saw him since then, of course, but it was my last *real* memory . . . a *good* memory . . . him at his finest. It’s how I want to remember him.”

“That’s what Alana tells me, too.” Abigail smiled. “It’s better to remember my father at his best, rather than his worst, and that good and bad can coexist in the same person. It sounds good, doesn’t it? I can remember hunting with him, cooking with him . . . I think she forgets that it’s hard to get closure with a scar on my neck to remember how he tried to gut me.”

“Is this something you have discussed in therapy?” Hannibal asked.

“Why? No one there understands it. If I tell them that I’d do it again, because it was the only way I survived, then they look at me as if I *should* have died. If I tell them I should have died to save the others, they become horrified like I’m suicidal. You can’t win. I think all they want to hear is that I’m okay and I won’t grow to be like my father. It’s not something I can promise, though, is it? I love the good moments between us, but I still hate what he did to me . . . to them . . .”

Will stood. He stole the attention of both Abigail and Hannibal. They both watched in silence, as he paced a little before the *chaise longue*, but finally he moved his way to the desk. The blue eyes widened a fraction. Will stared down at the papers as if it were the first time seeing the sketches, and perhaps – as far as memories were concerned – it *was* . . . Hannibal smirked. He turned back to Abigail, while Will busied himself moving and lifting sketches in his peripheral vision, and folded his hands within his lap. Abigail asked in a calm voice:

“At what point do I go from ‘victim’ to ‘survivor’?”

“Can the two not coincide?” Hannibal asked.

“Just like ‘good’ and ‘evil’?” Will asked flippantly. “I suppose even the victimised aren’t truly victims until the moment they give in, but sometimes . . . sometimes it’s easier to just swim down instead of fighting the current, isn’t it? I feel like I’m drowning every day . . .”

“Well, that’s comforting,” teased Abigail.

“I am afraid Will is not quite himself at this moment,” said Hannibal. “Why do you not take a walk for a little while, Abigail? There is a lovely new café not far from here; Will and I will come find you when we are done here, and I will drive you back to the hospital. We can talk more about your fishing trip and your stay in our home on the journey.”

“‘Our’ home?” Will asked.

Hannibal looked to Will. The office chair creaked under Will’s weight, as he reclined back and ran his gaze over the sketches, and Hannibal – with a low sigh – stood to move beside Abigail, who rose in turn and smoothed out her attire. He took her coat and held it steady, and a small ‘thanks’ fell from Abigail as she slid her arms through the holes. A gentle touch to her upper back helped to guide her back to the main doors, where he held open the door, and he lightly brushed at the lapels of her coat with the back of his hand, as he whispered:

“Will you be okay on your own, Abigail?”

“I’d say you sound like my father, but I don’t want to be insulting.”

The smile betrayed her humour. He smiled back. A quick wave followed, as Abigail disappeared out of the door and into the hallway beyond, and – with a soft exhale – Hannibal closed the door behind her with a soft click of the lock. He turned back toward Will. A series of swift and deliberate strides took him to the desk, where he perched on the edge with his fingers wrapped around the wood for partial balance. The breeze blew in around them.

Hannibal brought his hand again to the soft cheek. Will leaned his head into the touch with an instinctual nuzzle, as the hot flesh pressed itself to cool skin, and the beard scratched a little against his palm, as the usual grooming routine had been all but abandoned. Hannibal leaned close and breathed deep, as he caught in the fevered sweetness of the rich scent. He pulled back and placed his sketches back into their folder, before he slid a plain piece of paper before Will. A pen followed. He placed it politely and parallel to the page, as he said:

“You have a fever, Will.”

“I’m fine.”

“You are anything but ‘fine’,” sighed Hannibal. “Abigail looks to us for refuge and support, but to hear you espousing negativity and beliefs in futility will only reinforce her own self-doubts. I am glad that you are forging a bond with her, as is necessary in a father figure, but

you must remember that the father before tried to steal her life and those now must bestow upon her a new life. We must not teach her to succeed where Garret Jacob Hobbs failed."

"There's something wrong with me," choked Will. "I think I need a neurologist . . . there has to be someone that can do brains scans or MRI or take blood, right? Like, just do every test available to find out what's wrong with my brain. I don't know who I am any more . . . I'm scared, Hannibal. I'm scared I'm turning into him . . . scared I might hurt Abigail . . ."

"This is stress-induced mental illness exacerbated by your pre-rut, nothing more."

"Then what's the harm in doing some tests? No harm, no foul."

Hannibal tapped at the paper and said calmly:

"Draw me a clock, Will."

Will rolled his eyes, as he took the pen into a callused hand. He snatched at the paper, before he pulled it towards him and popped off the pen lid, and – with a low huff – scrawled a circle onto the plain white page and proceeded to mark down the numbers. The numbers were forced onto one side of the circle, where the hands were awkwardly drawn facing the same right side. Will capped the pen and put it down. He turned the paper around and slid it to Hannibal, before he smiled and leaned back with his hands resting on the arms of the office chair.

"I am Will Graham," said Will. "I am here in Hannibal Lecter's office, and the time is . . . well, it's certainly not 'early', in any case." Will shrugged. "There; it's a perfectly normal clock, from a perfectly normal man, and one that needs your referral to a neurologist."

"What you need is an endocrinologist, Will."

"What I need is for someone to trust that I know my own body."

"I believe that you once *knew* your body, but your body is no longer your own." Hannibal took the paper and placed it aside. "The imbalance of hormones can do many things to a person; in women and omega men, it can lead to issues such as endometriosis, poly-cystic ovarian syndrome, and infertility as several examples. It can lead to physiological symptoms as a result."

"You mean like hot flushes, mood swings, and forgetfulness? Well, that'd be great, except I'm not an omega or a woman . . . I also don't think hormonal imbalances can cause night terrors, sleepwalking, or hallucinations, but what do I know? I can't sleep. I can't function. I'm begging you, as my friend . . . probably my only real friend right now . . . I *need* you to find me someone that can run tests and fix me. I need to get better before I get so much worse."

Will pushed back the chair. He strode towards the open window, where he kept his head within his hands and hunched his back as he walked, and – with every step – his body swayed as if walking an imperfect line, until he finally stopped before the window. He slid it closed, so that the nettings and curtains fell flat against the wall. The rain continued to strike

against the panes, where the rivulets on the glass cast a strange and moving shadow upon his face, and within the darkness he seemed infinitely smaller than before. Hannibal stood. He crossed the office.

A small touch to the shoulder roused Will. He sighed and leaned into the touch, until a thumb brushed against the stubble of his neck, and the tips of fingers rubbed lightly at the base of his hairline, as blue eyes fell half-lidded as Will breathed deep. Hannibal smiled. He stepped close enough that bodies touched, before he brought his hand around to clasp Will's chin and tilt his head upward, and – as their gazes met – Hannibal leaned in close to his ear and whispered:

"I will arrange for you to see a specialist, Will."

"Thank you," sighed Will.

"I must say that I have been around many alphas in my time." Hannibal took in a deliberate deep breath. "We work in fields that attract dominant and masculine energies, with law and medicine often containing cardboard cut-outs of the same faces repeating *ad nauseam*. I have rarely formed friendships with these people, and in my life I have had but three brief affairs, but still I find myself surrounded by people and inundated with many acquaintances.

"Shall I be honest with you, Will? There is not one that has captured my interest. At least, there are none that have deeply fascinated me on an intrinsic level and whom I have enjoyed their company above all else. You are not like other men. You have an empathy and honesty unlike anything I have encountered, filled with raw potential . . . like clay ready to be moulded . . ."

"At least you can feel safe with other men."

"Can I? You have seen the rest of society, not just the men . . . there are those that seek to please, whether for self-serving or selfless motivations, always wearing masks and costumes to become what they think is wanted, losing themselves in the process. They are shallow and vapid things, no longer with substance as they lose all that was once original. The rest are no better.

"The others care nothing for the feelings of others, as they step on anyone and anything to get one rung higher on the ladder, and one must always watch their back in their presence, lest you feel the metal slide between your vertebrae. You have met those like Chilton, have you not? You are different . . . you seek neither to please or alienate, but only to be true to yourself while paying others the same level of respect they give in return. It is . . . refreshing."

Hannibal brushed his knuckles against Will's jaw. It was a slow and intimate touch, as he ran his hand from just beneath the ear to the very tip of his chin, and – with lingering content – reluctantly lowered his hand, where it traced a line over throat and chest. Will licked his lips. He stepped closer to Hannibal, until chests touched and every breath was shared. The pupils were blown wide, while his lips were parted and cheeks flushed, and his hands came up to toy with the lapels of Hannibal's suit-jacket. Hannibal smiled; it deepened the lines about his eyes.

“You’re not like other omegas,” muttered Will.

“Have you been around other omegas?” Hannibal smiled. “You were an alpha born to an alpha and beta, surrounded by other alphas, and even your potential mates have been fellow alphas. I wonder if you have ever experienced such a palate cleanser . . . I would honoured if I could be the omega that proves to you the worth of our dynamic. May I be that one, Will?”

“You wouldn’t want a man like me. You wouldn’t want someone so broken.”

“Please, Will, do not assume to know what I want . . .”

Hannibal leaned ever closer. He paused with their lips close enough to feel the warmth, but just far apart to avoid direct contact, and it sent warm tingles through every nerve, as Hannibal placed one hand on Will’s hip and the other buried itself deep into his hair. He pulled hard. It brought a loud gasp from Will, whose head was tilted back to expose his throat. The vein throbbed in time with his racing heart, as Will panted and held even tighter against the lapels, and Hannibal was yanked so close that they were pressed flush against one another with some force.

The start of a growing erection broke through the denim of his jeans, as Will ground subtly against him with a small roll of his hips, and Hannibal broke the distance between them . . . *lips touched lightly, moving without coordination or purpose, until a kiss slowly formed . . .* light pecks, lips barely parted . . . a tongue came out in a tentative search. It was a warm exploratory gesture from Will, almost dominant were it not for the slight hesitation . . .

Hannibal moaned. He took control of the kiss. He pressed their lips together in earnest, as his tongue dove into the waiting mouth and explored every inch, and his hand upon the hip slid onto a taut buttock and squeezed with a firm hold. The other hand continued to grip at the hair, as he all but devoured Will. The small grunts and mewls and pants were something associated with an omega, but somehow more erotic from an alpha. Hannibal grew hard.

He ground back against Will. Hannibal fought the urge to throw Will down, as he instead gently guided them into a new position, and pressed his back against the wall, with Will now before him and able to take full control of the situation. Hannibal moved his hands to Will’s shoulders, while his leg slid upward to wrap around that waist. Will paused. He moved his fingers to random points all over Hannibal, as if unsure how to proceed with the power in his hands, and Hannibal forced back a smile. He purposely ground against Will. Will choked out:

“I – I can’t . . .”

A low sigh fell from Will, as he stepped back. There was a visible tent in his jean, which was almost hidden by hands that untucked his shirt, and his body angled itself away from Hannibal, as he shuffled from foot to foot and hunched over like a schoolboy with his first erection. Hannibal bit into his cheek to fight back a smirk. He schooled his expression into a frown, as he looked away with a staged wince, and smoothed down his suit with a visible tremble, before he stopped and turned to Will. He kept his eyes low, refusing to meet Will’s gaze, as he whispered:

“I did not mean to disrespect you, Will.”

“It – It’s not that . . .”

Will walked in circles, while he folded his arms across his chest. Hannibal remained still against the wall, where he feigned panted breaths and licked his lips, before he slowly took the few steps that would bring him to Will’s side. He placed a hand on a broad shoulder. Will relaxed and turned to face him, with his hands opening and closing at his sides, and his head tilted back once again, as if seeking contact with the lips from which he had not long parted. Hannibal smiled, as he brushed back a lock of brown hair behind Will’s ear. Will looked down. He blushed.

“I kissed Alana,” laughed Will. “It turns out she didn’t want damaged goods.”

“I am not Alana, but nor are you damaged goods.”

“I – I know some people can be fluid . . . I think she’s dating a woman now, someone named Margot, and I would be lying if I said I’ve never thought what it’d be like to be with a man, but I – I don’t know . . . I don’t want for this to just be some ‘rebound’ or ‘experiment’. I don’t want to do that to you . . . I’ve alienated too many people to lose everything by losing you.”

“You could never lose me, Will. If what you need is to know who you are, I would gladly be the sounding board for you to discover yourself or to help you land on your feet. I will still be here afterward, and nothing would need change between us unless you desire a change.”

“I . . . I need time to think.”

Hannibal leaned a little closer. It was just enough for lips to brush, drawing out a small gasp from Will, who instinctively sought to deepen the kiss . . . this time, Hannibal drew back. He whispered: ‘*it would not be right to take advantage’*. Will cursed. He darted across the room for his coat, which he pulled on with hurried and jerked movements, and finally came to a stop by the main doors, where Hannibal waited with a donned coat in turn. The rain continued to pound against the windowpanes outside, while Will fussed and fidgeted with his outfit.

“I need time to think,” muttered Will.

“Take all the time you need.”

“You won’t say anything to Abigail?”

Hannibal smiled, as he held open the door for them. He flicked off the lights, while Will stepped out into the foyer, and closed the door behind him with a soft click. The deep scent of a pre-rut threatened to tip over into a full rut, while the scent of encephalitis thickened and ripened, and Hannibal – with a purposely lingering touch to Will’s neck – locked eyes with him and leaned in close, as he promised in a voice with an exaggerated accent that brought a shiver to Will:

“I will not say a word . . ."

Chapter 5

A bell chimed . . .

The door pushed open with some force. It was cool inside the music shop, with one of the windows open to allow through a small draught, and the sun caught at the raindrops still trickling down the glass, sending distorted shadows out across the wooden floorboards. A selection of stringed instruments filled one side of the room, where Abigail wandered over and lifted them with a curious hand. The bounce indicated an interest in weight and size.

Will closed the door behind him, as he watched her examine the instruments. The artwork on the walls featured framed images of various instruments, while one far wall was lined with various violins, and – putting in its direction – Abigail darted over with the energy of one much younger than her years. A man stood behind the counter, just before an arch to what appeared to be a private office or space for teaching students. He matched the description set by Hannibal. Will nodded to him and offered a polite wave, before he called over to Abigail:

"Are you sure about this?"

Abigail took a violin from the wooden shelf. The way she held it seemed right on a technical level, but there was something eerily 'incorrect' about its position, and her hands mimed pulling a bow across the strings in an awkward manner. He walked towards her and stood just to the side, while the man – Tobias – continued to watch with professional interest from a distance. Will shoved his hands into his pockets, while he lowered his head and shuffled from foot to foot, and Abigail put the violin back with a respectful touch, before she whispered with a smirk:

"You know it's just violin lessons, right?"

"I know, but I'm just not comfortable in these places," said Will. "It always reminds me of when I was a kid . . . all these fancy people on expensive boats . . . they'd beg my pops to fix their motors or machines, while I lurked around as the bastard autistic kid in scruffy clothes. I'm here surrounded by instruments I'll never afford, with people coming out the shop in suits, and I –"

"Feel like you stand out more than Hannibal at the lake?"

"I never *did* convince him to wear the waders."

"That would be something," laughed Abigail. "You know you've changed a lot, right? I mean, not just with the nervousness and things, but your style . . . I noticed you brought a new coat, and you're wearing scarves and accessories more, too. It looks good; fancy, but still *you*."

"Maybe you two are a good fashion influence on me?"

A low cough sounded out from the counter. Tobias wore a casual suit, with a tightly knotted tie, and held his hands clasped before him, as he strode towards them with slow swings of his long legs along the shop-floor. Will turned his back to the violins, as he cast his eye between Abigail and Tobias. The sun picked up strength outside, where it brightened the shop and added a glow to Abigail, as she pushed back a lock of hair. Tobias bore a smile that failed to quite reach his eyes, which narrowed with an almost dangerous depth, and he said in a faux cheerful voice:

"May I help you both?"

Will turned fully toward Tobias, but caught sight of the counter. A few strings sat on display, neatly between a monitor and violin, and – with a soft hum – Will walked away from Abigail and Tobias towards the counter. There was a muttered '*I'm sorry'* behind him, followed by a *'it's not a problem'*. He brushed a finger along the strings. Tobias came to stand beside him; Will instinctively cast his eyes around for a price, as he scratched at his neck and blushed. He turned around and leaned back against the counter, before he muttered in a low voice:

"I know someone that is looking for new strings."

"Do you play an instrument at all, Mr . . .?"

"Graham," said Will. "It's Will Graham. I – I don't play . . . I couldn't even play you 'Chopsticks', but I know someone that is forever on the harpsichord. It was his idea to come here, actually, as Abigail is looking to learn an instrument; I suggested saving money by having him teach her the harpsichord himself, but apparently a violin is better suited to her personality."

"It may be a wise decision," said Tobias. "In my experience, parents make the worst teachers. I find they're often too lenient with their children's flaws, or too strict in their expectations, and it can often be difficult to undo bad habits and teach again in a correct manner."

"Well," said Abigail, "I'm not even sure I want to learn yet."

"Oh? Then what brought you here?"

"Hannibal – ah, my guardian – thought it'd be a good idea. I've been going fishing with Will, which has helped a lot, but the theory goes an instrument would let me express myself more, like be able to get out a lot of emotion. It's supposed to be cathartic. I think I'd prefer a tub of ice-cream and a cheesy movie, but I suppose this way is a lot more constructive, right?"

"Indeed, I'm sure we can find an instrument that you'll enjoy."

"They're here," whispered Will. "Can you see them?"

A silence fell between them. Abigail and Tobias shared a 'look', one with raised eyebrows and half-parted lips fumbling over aborted words, and Will – with a trembling hand – reached against for the strings that lay perfectly on display in an elegant case. A few barely remembered scenes ran through his mind . . . *'cat gut produces the best strings'* . . . Will

stumbled back. A cold sweat broke over him. The walls seemed to bleed around him . . . *blurring, fading, shimmering* . . . Tobias stepped towards him . . .

The figure of the man shifted . . . *antlers protruding from the head, black skin turning into something like inky darkness, and words that reverberated like an echo* . . . a light-headed sensation stole his senses, until he swayed on the spot. He closed his eyes. A sound like trickling water echoed through the room . . . it was cold . . . the sun was fading away as shadows filled the space . . . *heartbeat racing, mouth dry . . . a falling sensation* . . . the floor gave way . . .

"Will? Are you okay?"

The falling sensation continued. The walls closed in around him. A breeze caught at his hair, blowing it about his cheeks, and his arms grew weightless, as if in water. It was a weightless room, but one so cold . . . icy . . . he struggled to catch his breath. A firm pressure landed on his chest, forcing the wind from him, and the inky blackness blinded him, while his arms flung outward in search of purchase, desperate for something to hold onto in the chaos.

'Will? Answer me! Will? Will!'

At some point, he reversed position. The ground was coming towards him . . . fast, hard . . . he collided with such force that his joints ached and his palms bled. It was cold. The blood was cold. It covered his hands and forearms, where it looked black on white skin, and he knelt as it in prayer on hard tile that stank of iron. He struggled to focus. He fought to breathe. The sleeves of his shirt were rolled up to his elbows, while his glasses were steamed, and there was a person before him . . . sat on something like a pew . . . dressed in a suit, perfectly perched . . .

'I think there's something wrong, Jack.'

Jack? No, Jack wasn't there . . .

Will jolted back to reality.

The blood was thick and cold on his hands. It was congealed and flaking in places, with the colour a shade of red closer to black, and the thick 'liquid' coated both sides of his hands, until it stopped just at the start of his forearms. The tiled floor beneath him sent sharp waves of pain through his joints. The skies outside were inky black. He raised a hand to shield his eyes, while he squinted and looked around in search of a clock or calendar. He struggled to stand.

A pair of hands rested on his shoulder, pulling him into the aisle. The high windows gave away nothing of what lay beyond, instead they only reflected back the interior of the room, and the plain walls spoke nothing of personality, instead leaving a stale and sterile environment. Will turned his gaze about the room. It was a courtroom of sorts, but unfamiliar even after his years in as a police officer, and filled with the bright lights and cameras of a crime scene, but ones focused on the gallery and far away from the judge's bench.

He followed the line of light. A body sat donned in a suit upon a bench. The long blonde hair was pulled into a perfect bun, exposing a face donned with perfect make-up, and the posture was so precise that it was almost posed. The hands lay neatly folded on a pink skirt, which exposed two legs covered in old-fashioned tights. A black leg sat beside a white leg, while a long red line ran around the neck with fine stitches, and the blouse was pulled up midway over a brown torso, where it revealed an open wound with stitches torn open and organs exposed.

The wound was originally closed, that much was obvious. The muttered chatter penetrated his senses . . . *'- took the pancreas this time, but who knows what's missing now?'* . . . Will held his hands out before him, as if in offering or repentance. He cast his eyes to the main doors of the court, where Jimmy and Brian stood side-by-side with open mouth and narrowed eyes. Jack stepped before him and filled his vision. He looked Will over with a cold gaze and spat:

"What the hell is wrong with you?"

Will panted. Jack stood tall before him, while his heart raced in his chest. It drowned out all other sound, like a beating drum in time to some unknown tune, and the blood on his hands stated to itch and burn and blister, until his finger started to scratch at the flesh. He whispered out like a chant: *'no, no, no'*. Jack grabbed at his upper arms. The touch was firm and hard, something that could bruise instead of comfort, and Will locked eyes with him, as adrenaline coursed through every vein and every muscle. Jack spat out in a low voice:

"Will? Will! Snap out of it, Will!"

Will took in deep breaths. He held his hands before him, where they hovered between both men, and dropped his gaze once more, as his heart slowed and breath returned. Jack slowly released his grip and stepped back. The world retuned to normality, as people bustled about in the hallway outside with a familiar sound, and his vision focussed so that the entirety of the room came into view, like a figure looming from the horizon. Will perched on the bench opposite the victim. He continued to count each breath, while he fought back the lightheaded sensations.

"I – I think I lost time again," muttered Will.

"'Again'?" Jack asked. "What do you mean 'again'?"

"I've – ah – been losing time . . . forgetting where I am, forgetting *who* I am . . . I was just with Abigail at the music shop; she wanted to learn the violin, so I promised to take her to sign her up for lessons, and then I – I saw – I saw the strings and I remembered the Chesapeake Ripper and suddenly I was . . . I was here. I don't even remember touching the body."

"You just contaminated the crime-scene, Will!"

"I know, Jack! *I know*!" Will stepped back. "Look, just . . . let me clean off. I'll give you my profile afterward, but I need to get this blood off my hands. It . . . It burns. I feel like I was the one to cut them into pieces and clean out their organs in the process. I need to get clean."

Will brushed past Jack, as he marched towards the main doors. The doors were thrown open by two uniformed officers, while Jimmy and Brian parted before him on either side, and – as he paused between them – the awkward silence spoke volumes. Jimmy avoided his gaze with stuttered words, while Brian simply curled him lip and looked him over. Will winced. He dropped his head and marched away down the corridor, where a small bathroom lay tucked to the side for those in the gallery of various court proceedings. He threw himself inside.

The air was cool and crisp. It ran over his sweat-soaked skin, bringing an ounce of relief, as he ran towards the sinks and poured out cold water. The liquid ran over his hands and bare arms, creeping over the flesh like moving ants in a nest, and – with a wince – he dug his fingers into the blood and scrubbed with enough energy he could muster. The door creaked open behind him, letting in a beam of bright light that caught just wrong at his glasses.

“Hey, it’s me,” whispered a voice.

He looked over his shoulder. Beverly stood in the doorway with her white coat pristine, and in her hands rested a clipboard filled with all sorts of notes and dates and numbers. He said nothing, as he returned to washing his hands, even as she came to stand beside him. Will switched off the taps, before strolling over to the paper towels with a slouch, and – snatching at the papers – looked back to her with a small wince, before muttering his apologies. Beverly closed the door behind her. A heavy sigh escape her, as she rolled her eyes and observed:

“You’re in a rut, Will.”

“Really?” Will teased. “I can’t say life feels that boring to me.”

“You know what I mean! You shouldn’t be here.”

Beverly marched towards him. A soft hand pushed itself to his forehead, where he batted it away with still wet hands, and stepped back with a pointed glare, which was matched in intensity by someone used to standing her ground. The two of them stood in silence, as he finished drying his hands and tossed the used papers into the bin beside him. He let out a long breath. Will collapsed back against the tiled wall; he tented his hands before his mouth, before running them over his face and hair, and finally dropped them at his sides with a heavy thud. He muttered out:

“What is it with people taking my temperature?”

“You’re running a fever,” said Beverly.

“It’s not unusual with a rut.”

“No, but -!” Beverly shook her head. “You should be at home resting, Will. We don’t need to be dealing with sexual harassment claims just because someone caught your scent and claimed you’re flirting with them, all as they’ve read into things what they want to read. You know people are funny with this stuff . . . get one person with outdated ideas and -?”

“I know,” muttered Will. “I didn’t expect to go into a rut this soon. I was fine with Abigail in the shop, but then . . . suddenly . . . it just hit me hard, and five minutes late I wake up covered in blood and have no idea where I am or what’s going on. I’m losing my mind.”

“Nah, you just need a good night with a squeaking mattress.”

“Rocking headboards? Marvin Gaye on the radio?”

“Sure, why not?” Beverly laughed. “Look, I’m not saying it’ll fix *all* your problems, but it’ll fix *some* of them and end your rut a little earlier . . . promise me you’ll see a doctor, though? You need to find someone that can deal with whatever ‘this’ is, because you’re sure not coping, Will. I’ve never seen you like this . . . I’ve never seen you lose total control . . .”

A broken silence fell between them. The officers in the hallway chatted and laughed and gossiped, while a tap at the far end of the bathroom dripped with an echoing rhythm, and someone – somewhere – a woman sobbed. It was faint sound, right on the edge of his consciousness that straddled the line between reality and insanity. He walked slowly towards the door, where he pulled it open with a sluggish movement. Will paused. He swayed on the spot, before he opened his mouth and choked out with a crackled voice:

“I should call Hannibal to pick me up.”

“Bad idea,” said Beverly. “You know what ruts are like; it’s like being the only drunk in a room filled with sober people, and – with Hannibal in pre-heat – you could set him off into a heat and end up with *two* people not quite in their right mind. You’re alone . . . You like each other . . .”

Beverly made an obscene hand gesture. It brought a blush to Will’s cheeks, while she simply laughed in response and winked in his direction, and – against his will – a smile crept across his lips, as she teased: *‘there you go’*! The two shared a look, before both burst out into laughter both broken and amused in equal measure. It was enough to drain the tension from his muscles, as his shoulders slumped and his back hunched. The smile faded from Beverly, as the seriousness returned without a beat, and she shrugged with a sad expression, before whispering:

“Look, wait here a minute?”

“What? *Why*?”

“I’m going to drive you home,” said Beverly. “I’ll tell Jack that you’re in a rut, get you a few weeks off from work, and you can *stay home* . . . I mean it, Will. I’ll let Hannibal know to avoid you for a bit, and I’ll get Alana to trade off with me on checking in on you. If this is the worst things get? Great. It’s just you know as well as I do that ruts get worse before they get better.”

“I know, I know. Hannibal has found me a doctor; I have an appointment in a few days, so he’ll be able to get to the bottom of this, and he’ll fix everything . . . I’m not crazy and this isn’t just a goddamned rut . . . I just need to get to the bottom of this, that’s all.”

“Okay, well, let’s get you home first, okay?”

Beverly moved towards the door. The noise of the world beyond returned, as Beverly stepped out into the hallway and placed a hand on his upper arm, and – guiding him back out into the light – Will raised a hand over his eyes to block out the worst. Jimmy came over with a coat over one arm and a bag on the other. They barely registered to Will, even as the coat was slid onto his body by Beverly and the handle of the bag was pressed into his hand. Jimmy scurried away again, while Beverly led him to a quiet corner and fussed about him. He choked out:

“You don’t believe me.”

A quiet exhale was the only response, as she stepped back to look about the corridor. Jack stood at the far end before the double doors to the courtroom, while Jimmy recited something to him that had both looking in their direction, and – as two sets of eyes stared hard at him – Will winced and turned his back to them. Beverly dropped a hand onto his back. The warmth from her body, as she leaned in close, provided little comfort. Beverly whispered:

“Let’s just get you home . . .”

Chapter 6

It was a strong aroma . . .

The two dishes emitted a cloud of steam, which swirled in the air above. A thick red-wine sauce covered the devilled kidneys in an intricate fashion, while the roasted and seasoned vegetables neatly lined the side of each plate, and – with a smile Hannibal carried them into the dining room with perfect poise and posture. The plates clattered a little against the matching chargers. He proceeded to take the crystal decanter and poured out the red wine; rich scents flowed from the *merlot*, with hints of plums and cherries and violets. Hannibal placed down the decanter.

He rounded the table and took his seat opposite his guest. Tobias sat with napkin neatly on his lap, with his expression perfectly schooled into an incomprehensible stoicism, and his smile was both polite and insincere, as it failed to quite meet his eyes. The silence between them was broken only by the soft ticking of the clock, along with the breeze outside that brought snow brimming against the frame of the garden doors. Tobias drew in a deep breath for the aroma.

“I hope you enjoy,” said Hannibal.

“I’m sure I will,” replied Tobias.

Hannibal smiled. He waited for Tobias to pick up his knife and fork, before taking his in turn, and there followed the familiar clatter of cutlery on plates. The knife sliced easily through the kidneys, with little to no resistance, and the sauce dripped slowly over the marinated meat, as he brought it to his mouth and took a long bite. A low sigh escaped him as an exhale, as the rich tastes washed over his tongue. Hannibal closed his eyes. He allowed several seconds to pass, before he opened his eyes and saw Tobias finishing a swallow and smiling with some sincerity.

“This is delicious,” said Tobias. “You’ll have to share your recipe.”

“Ah, I rarely share my recipes,” teased Hannibal. “I think it is important for a master of a craft to maintain some secrets, else there will be all too many emulating him. After all, what could possibly be considered special about the mass produced? I imagine it must be the same with your craft. The sound that the cat-gut produces is extraordinary, but were everyone to play with such strings then it would lose all that made it unique. We would surely yearn for the synthetic fibres.”

“Is this the age-old debate about the worth of an object? I find there are two types of people: those that crave rarity and uniqueness, even at the cost of quality, and those that prize the quality of an object, even if it is wildly shared and readily available. I would take the sound of cat-gut over the synthetic strings any day, even if all musicians were to use them.”

“I suppose one could say that the two go hand in hand.” Hannibal cut into a kidney. “If an object is both rare in nature and high in quality, it would be the most ideal to possess

regardless of where one stands in regards to art and antiques. It would be the 'holy grail', even."

"A lot like your cooking, hmm? Tell me, where do you get your lamb?"

"Will you tell me where you obtain your cat-gut in return?"

The two locked eyes as the clock ticked. Hannibal reached for his wine glass, never once blinking or averting his gaze, and took a long sip of the red wine, before placing his glass down and slowly moving his hand back to his plate. Tobias lowered his gaze. A low chuckle fell from his lips, as he shook his head and sipped at his wine in turn. The smile on Hannibal widened, as he lowered his head and watched Tobias from the corner of his eyes, and he played with the contents of his plate with slow and subtle movements. He asked in an upbeat tone:

"How is Abigail progressing in her studies?"

"It's only been a lesson," said Tobias. "I can see she has a great deal of potential, and she understands well why it is important to begin on more difficult strings. I think the greatest level of difficulty will be to get her to leave her mind, so that she can fully engage with the pieces she plays, and to inject some feeling as opposed to playing from rote."

"I have always envied those able to play such instruments. It is amusing to me when some would proclaim not to have the patience to learn, but would then engage in such pursuits such as fishing or woodwork or even meditation . . . there seems to be a biased towards the musical arts."

"Hmm, the greatest challenge is getting the younger generation away from video games. It feels like a cliché, and perhaps I am showing my age, but there seems to be a desire for instant gratification . . . you progress a level, you gain a reward . . . too bad life doesn't come with such rewards. It will be important for Abigail to learn advancement is a reward in itself."

Tobias leaned back in his chair. It creaked under his weight, while his long fingers toyed with the stem of his glass, and – with a half-smirk that brought lines about his cheeks – he swirled the contents of the glass with slow and steady movements. The wine sloshed about inside, with small splashes letting the aroma spread out beyond the dish itself. Hannibal breathed deep. He sat straight and continued his meal, while Tobias watched him with a raised eyebrow. Tobias sipped at his wine, before putting down the glass with a slight clatter, and said in a faux-cheerful tone:

"What does Mr Graham feel about her lessons?"

The smile fell from Hannibal. A subtle flare of the nostrils betrayed his emotion, as he took in a deep breath and froze his hand somewhere above his plate. The knuckles around the knife turned white, while he locked eyes with Tobias and narrowed his gaze, and slowly he placed the knife down beside his plate, where he rested a still hand over the silver handle. Tobias poked at the vegetables, where they slid around the plate and through the sauce. The

glass remained in his other hand. The meal was effectively over, as Hannibal said in a firm and slow voice:

“Will is currently fishing with Abigail.”

“That’s not what I asked.”

“Abigail is being released into our custody.” Hannibal took a napkin. “We have two very different approaches to parenting, and – truth be told – I never saw the appeal of a child until Abigail came into our lives, but I certainly appreciate our family unit. I thought I would struggle with the divided attention of Will, but I believe this has focused his attention more . . .”

“Except, he’s a bit preoccupied by the Chesapeake Ripper?”

“It is his job, is it not? It is a fascinating criminal case, especially for one that has an interest in behavioural and criminal psychology . . . a serial killer leaving flagrant and elaborate displays, all while taking the intestines of his victims -? I can see why it would hold his interest.”

“At least until a new serial killer came along.”

Tobias lowered his glass to the table. He pushed back his plate. It took with it the placemat, along with the cutlery that rested on the fabric, and sat just far enough from him to make a point, as Tobias moved his hands back to his lap. He folded the fabric of the napkin, before placing it neatly beside the unfinished meal. Hannibal slowly wrapped his fingers back around the handle of the knife, as he made an obvious show of cutting into the kidneys on his plate, but the edge faced carefully away from him. Hannibal remained silent, as Tobias asked:

“Does he know you’re the Jigsaw Killer?”

The wind picked up speed against the windows. Hannibal tensed his shoulders; his muscles ached with a sudden pressure in his joints, and his eyes locked firmly on Tobias, who met his gaze with equal intensity and focus. Tobias folded his hands before him on the table, where the fingers intertwined in such a manner that sudden movement would be restricted, and he followed with a subtle nod of his head. The clock slowly ticked by the seconds, while the wind howled from outside, and the silence stretched on until it was finally broken by a loud sound.

A door slammed.

Tobias quirked an eyebrow and tilted his head. Hannibal shrugged. He slowly slid back his chair, as he rose to his feet and pulled at his shirt-cuffs, and – with a muttered ‘*excuse me’* – walked with purpose and speed towards the main doors into the hallway. A shadowy figure moved about the foyer, with frantic movements and muttered complaints. He appeared to be talking to himself, or perhaps some unseen figure, and he showed no sign of acknowledgement, as Hannibal came towards him and stopped within the doorway, where he looked onward.

Will paced back and forth, with hands buried in his hair. He wore a long coat, one recently purchased and flattering to his figure, but it was thrown open and revealed old jeans torn below the knee, along with boots covered in mud that coated the denim high above the ankle. It was a firm mixture of high-fashion and practical clothes of an old kind. The brown locks of hair were slicked back with sweat, with curls knotted and messy to an unbearable extent.

Will turned. The skin was pale and sunken, with black bags under bloodshot eyes, and it was clear that sleep was an elusive mystery to one seeking so desperately to avoid nightmares, as well as one lost to fits of tears and emotion. The scent that rolled from him was a fevered sweetness that bordered on saccharine, enough that it was thick on the tongue, like the tangy and bitter taste of one walking through the over-spray of cologne or perfume. It was a clear rut. A smile broke over Hannibal, as he lifted his head high and stepped forward.

"I-I'm sorry," choke Will. "I – I had . . . I didn't know . . ."

"Shush now," whispered Hannibal. "I am here, Will."

He slowly walked towards Will. A hand touched upon his shoulder, with his arm rested over the upper back, and his free hand came to touch at Will's hip, as he gently guided him towards the dining room with a slow pace and careful determination. The skin was hot to the touch, as he stroked his thumb across the stubble on the neck. Will babbled aimlessly with stuttered stops and starts, with his feet dragging against the floorboards, until they reached the dining room.

The garden doors were flung wide open. The netted curtains fluttered in the wind, while snow danced around the floor, and the cold breeze seemed to bring Will to his senses, as he shivered and brought his coat tightly about his frame. Hannibal darted towards the doors. He closed them with a soft click, before locking them and shaking them to test the lock. The curtains shut afterwards, before he turned with a smile back to Will, who slumped over to the chairs and pushed them neatly back underneath the table. He mumbled, as his eyes fell on both plates:

"I'm not disturbing a date, am I?"

"If I were to prepare an intimate meal for two, I would hope that it would be a far more intimate affair than a simple dish on a rather plain dining table. I would expect candles, music . . . something more succulent than kidneys, most certainly. Aphrodisiacs are always a bonus."

"Oysters, chocolate-covered strawberries, and white wine?"

"Something like that," teased Hannibal.

Hannibal swept over to the table. He piled the plates and cutlery, as well as collected the glasses, and made his way swiftly over to the kitchen, where he paused to look back over his shoulder, and Will – running his hands over his face and hair – followed obediently inside. Hannibal scraped the plates and placed them inside the sink, while Will pulled off his coat and tossed into onto the leather armchair in the corner of the kitchen. The fabric fell

awkwardly over the seat, where it creased and folded in a small pile, and Hannibal sighed at the sight.

“Do not worry about my guest,” said Hannibal. “It was merely a work colleague, but one that was called away at the very last minute. I have a sneaking suspicion he disagrees with my methods, but also my – shall we say? – *research* into his area of expertise . . . I doubt it will be an issue easily resolved, but I believe we can reach a friendly state of rivalry soon.”

“Who would’ve thought psychiatry to be so cutthroat?”

“Indeed, it is easy for one to lose their head.”

“Lose one’s head or lose one’s mind?” Will blinked back tears. “I – I’m sorry; I know I shouldn’t have come here without warning, especially in a rut, but I just -! *I didn’t know what else to* do*, Hannibal*! I lost Abigail. I goddamned *lost* Abigail . . . I – I could have –”

“Steady, Will. Steady. Here, come sit down.”

Hannibal wiped his hands on a tea-towel, before dashing over to Will. The sound of hyperventilation drifted through the kitchen, even as Will was guided over to the armchair, and Hannibal snatched away the coat before Will sat down, before folding it over the back. He knelt before Will, who took in choked and deep breaths. A tear ran down his cheek and into his beard, staining the skin with a silvery trail, and his lips trembled into a broken smile, as he forced out a few incoherent sounds. The sounds continued, until he finally croaked out a broken:

“What if I hurt her?”

“I can assure you that Abigail is safe,” said Hannibal. “If it puts your mind to rest, I can call the hospital to check that she has been signed back into her room, but it seems that you have merely lost some time again . . . you are in a rut, after all. It makes sense that –”

“This *isn’t* just a rut! I don’t lose time in ruts!”

“Can we be sure about that? I will see if we can push forward your appointment any further, but I really do think that this is simply a symptom of a man who has neglected his needs and whose hormones are somewhat imbalanced. I was told by Jack that Beverly drove you home, where Alana and Beverley would take turns checking in on you . . . why are you not home?”

“I – I promised Abigail a fishing trip. I told you that. You knew that.”

“Did you? I do not remember having such a conversation.”

Hannibal frowned. He pressed the back of his hand to a clammy forehead, before – with a sigh – walking over to the oven and removing two well-baked desserts. They were plated with great expertise, as Will forced deep and slow breaths, and Hannibal drizzled over the chocolate sauce into an intricate pattern, before carrying it over to Will. He gently pressed the plate into trembling hands, and left into the dining room to take an extra chair, which was dropped opposite Will. Hannibal sat down with a graceful gesture, as he brightly smiled.

“I’m losing my mind,” choked Will.

Will toyed at the *soufflé* with his fork. The metal clicked at the sides of the dish, before he pulled out a small amount and played with it about the sauce, and his eyes remained unfocused and tear-stained, as he stared aimlessly at the floor between both sets of bodies. Hannibal slid closer to the edge of his seat, where he took in a deep breath and appreciated the intermingling aromas. He brought his hand to Will’s knee, where he squeezed gently, and let his thumb run over the rough material, before it dipped a little into the tear that or may not have been an intentional tear.

“Why do you think that, Will?”

“I’m no closer to finding either the Chesapeake Ripper or Jigsaw Killer,” spat Will. “I feel like . . . I feel like I’m losing myself in the Jigsaw Killer, like how I lost myself in Garrett Jacob Hobbs, only it – it’s different . . . I feel like there’s a message there, like he’s trying to tell me something, but then why me personally? I’m paranoid. I’m losing my sense of identity. I’m losing what makes me ‘*me*’! I don’t understand it . . . I don’t understand why *now* . . .

“There’s times where I’m scared it’s me. I notice the bodies are always at times where I’ve no alibi, and the victims are all connected to the legal profession in some way, but I feel like I’m reading too much into it . . . isn’t my job to read too much into it, though? If I could be losing my mind . . . if I could be losing time, enduring mood swings, sleepwalking . . .”

“You are no killer, Will,” whispered Hannibal.

“Aren’t I? I killed before, and it . . . it felt *good*.” Will winced. “That’s what scares me most; I felt powerful with that gun in my hand, but I felt this huge relief that justice had been served, that he finally met his end, and now . . . I feel guilty, ashamed, *sick*. I think this guy has inside information somehow . . . he knows layouts of places, shifts of people, even which security cameras are out and how to work the patrol cars . . . all information that I know.”

Will collapsed back in his seat. He kept a loose grip on his plate, enough that Hannibal quickly caught it and brought it back around to the wooden table nearby, and – as he turned back – Will was limp and loose like a rag-doll, with his throat beautifully exposed. Hannibal smiled. He rose slowly and came around Will, where he placed both hands on broad shoulders. The long fingers dug deeply into tense muscles, as he massaged at the flesh, and leaned down to better draw in the deep scent that was badly masked with cheap aftershave. Hannibal whispered:

“Why do you not move here?”

A burst of laughter fell from Will. It bordered between appreciation and irritation, something that straddled a line so closely that it was difficult to know whether the joke was on him or with him, but then Will slowly pulled forward, where the hands fell loosely from his shoulders. He craned his neck and looked behind him to Hannibal. The smile came and went in rapid succession, as flickering eyes ran back and forth over Hannibal, before Will bit into his lip with a visible canine and took in a long inhalation. He slowly stood and faced Hannibal, as he whispered:

“Are you serious?”

“Very,” said Hannibal.

“How would that even work?”

“We are Abigail’s co-guardians, are we not?” Hannibal smiled. “It would make matters far easier for us, were we in close proximity to discuss matters pertaining to her needs, and there is also the matter of your rut . . . Abigail is an alpha, so she will be unaffected, but you will still have needs that must be addressed. I do not mean anything untoward, but simply –”

“No, it’s fine, I get it.” Will blushed. “Stay hydrated? Don’t flirt inappropriately with omegas? I don’t need a babysitter, but these ruts can last a fortnight or more . . . I’m already out of my mind, and ruts can induce fevers, so fevers on top of fevers -? I’ll need all the help I can get.”

“I am glad you see the sense of being around another.”

“Yeah, but won’t my rut affect your heat?”

“I am already in pre-heat, in any case, but we are both mature adults, Will. You may be an attractive male, and I would not be averse to a relationship at any other time, but I believe I have enough self-control not to take advantage of you in a vulnerable state. Do you believe that you have the self-control to resist me, in turn? If so, there is no harm in your presence here.”

“I mean . . . I think so? Maybe?”

A blush broke over Will. Hannibal stepped closer. It left no time for thought or second-guessing, but instead allowed the omega scent – along with expensive cologne and a hint of chocolate – to flood Will’s senses, sending him stumbling back a few steps with hand on his head. The back of Will’s legs caught against the dining room chair, which knocked him back into a seating position. He mumbled out an apology, as he took the chair and dragged it back to its spot in the dining room, and Hannibal followed close behind, so that – as Will turned – they were only an inch apart, sharing every breath and exuding a shared warmth. Hannibal licked at his lips.

“I can offer you support, Will,” whispered Hannibal. “I can stop you when you sleepwalk. I can provide you an alibi. I can help heal your mind . . . I can stop you from losing yourself, but instead help you to fulfil the vast potential that you possess. You can bring Winston; I would not usually allow dogs in this house, but I believe I could make an exception in your case.”

“I . . . you . . . this is a *lot* that you’re offering, Hannibal.”

“I do not have many friends, Will. I could see you suffer alone, or I could see you cared for here, and – to be honest – I think the choice is obvious. I love you dearly, and I would gladly do all that I can to see you happy and healthy and free from these difficulties.”

A tear fell from those bright eyes. Will half-smiled, as he lifted his head. The two locked gazes, while Hannibal brought up a soft hand to wipe away the tear, and his hand lingered against the soft bristles of a well-kept beard, one far softer than the previous touches proved. The tips of his fingertips buried themselves into brown curls, while his thumb continued to brush back and forth along the pale skin of the cheek. Will turned his face. It brought the warmth of his breath against the sensitive skin of Hannibal's wrist, and he whispered out in turn:

"You love me dearly?"

Hannibal rapidly blink. He let out a soft sound between a scoff and a laugh, as he smiled wide enough to deepen the lines about his face, and slowly brought away his hand with a lingering touch, while he stepped back and feigned embarrassment. He stepped towards the kitchen, where he pressed a hand against the doorway, and looked back over his shoulder. Will sniffed and rubbed at his nose, while he shuffled from foot to foot. Hannibal slowly ran his eyes from feet to head, while Will stood unaware of the focus upon him, and finally Hannibal turned away.

"I will call the hospital to discuss the details of Abigail's release," said Hannibal. "In the meantime, you should make provisions for your dogs and pack for your stay here. It seems that I have this evening free, and so I could spend the night helping you to move, if you wish?"

"You know I'm not like other alphas? I'm losing my mind . . ."

"It is because you are not like other alphas that you are so special to me, Will."

Will lifted his gaze. He locked eyes with Hannibal. A smile fell over Hannibal, as he angled his body away and lowered his head, and assumed the typical 'bashful' and 'demure' demeanour that seemed to be expected, which brought an all too subtle reaction from Will. The pupils widened and the mouth fell open, and Will scratched awkwardly at the back of his neck, while the shuffling grew more and more obvious, as he hunched forward where he stood. Hannibal remained silent, as Will stuttered and struggled to speak. Will finally uttered:

"Do you mind if I freshen up before we go anywhere?"

"Take your time, Will," said Hannibal.

Will darted away. Hannibal drew in a deep breath, as he absorbed the lingering scent, and resumed in tidying the leftover plates and dishes from the kitchen, while he listened carefully for the sounds of footsteps and half-formed words. It was a mundane task to clean after previous messes, but it was done with great speed and familiarity. Hannibal paused only when he came to the two wine glasses, now shimmering clean with pure water, as they were turned upside-down on the draining board. He brushed his finger over the patterned crystal and smirked.

He was no longer alone . . .

Chapter 7

The monitor flashed with colour.

It moved rapidly, as the scan changed and adapted. The inflammation was clear to a person trained in the medical field, but incomprehensible to anyone else that may chance upon the scans in question, and – no doubt – mere gibberish to the man inside the machine. Hannibal smiled, as he kept enough space for Dr Sutcliffe to work. He moved with great speed and efficiency. The glass between the two rooms reflected back his image as he darted about between computers and papers, before finally he threw himself back in his office chair with a bounce and asked:

'How'd you know it was encephalitis?'

Hannibal stepped towards the table. He flicked through the medical records that lay open on the polished wood . . . a slight iron deficiency, weight gain, excess oestrogen . . . ironically, signs of a hormone imbalance. The smirk broke across his lips, as the corners of his lips deepened the lines about his face. Dr Sutcliffe angled his chair towards Hannibal, while the brain scans flickered behind him with a hypnotic rhythm, and there was a quirk to his eyebrow that spoke of some deeper conflict of emotion. Hannibal turned to face him and nodded.

'It has a very distinct scent,' said Hannibal. 'It can easily be mistaken for a rut or a hormone imbalance, but there is a fevered sweetness matched only by a lingering spiciness; it follows like an aftertaste. If Will were to form a bond with a lifetime mate, the scent of his rut would lose its intensity to all but his beloved, and I am sure others would be able to smell what I smell.'

'You can catch all of that from a smell? I can't smell anything.'

'I am have a very keen sense of smell, even for an omega. I was once able to tell that my teacher had stomach cancer long before he was even aware, and it is all too easy to identify a perfume by its aroma alone. Needless to say, it was very easy to diagnose.'

'Gee, what the heck do you smell on me?'

Hannibal smiled. He stepped towards Dr Sutcliffe. He dropped his hand lightly onto a bony shoulder, where he squeezed with a firm touch, and his eyes locked with those of the man beneath him, as the light from the monitor caught at his sharp features. It cast dark shadows about his face, emphasising the darkness that always lurked. The smile turned into a smirk, as kept close enough to break standard expectations of proximity, and said in a calm voice:

'Opportunity.'

* * *

The boxes lined the foyer. A few sat close to the roaring fireplace, where they overflowed with fabrics and accessories, and – with a stern voice – Hannibal called out for care when stacking boxes and the dangers of open flames. A half-distracted 'sorry' echoed out in a feminine voice, as Abigail darted back into the foyer and moved the boxes a few feet back. They sat centre of the foyer, instead, as a tripping hazard and obstacle to free movement. Will smiled.

He dumped a few carrier bags of clothes by the front door. The growing pile was at odds with the plastic storage-boxes that belonged to Abigail, and the few boxes he brought were a sturdy cardboard that was stained with rain and dirt. He kicked them to one side with his boot, while Hannibal stood centre of the room with his hand massaging his temple, and Winston sat obediently at his feet, where he panted and whined for attention. The woollen sweater was a far cry from his usual suits, and his loose blond locks were a refreshing sight.

The breeze blew in from the front doors, where it caught at Hannibal's hair. Will blushed. He closed the door with a soft click, as Abigail ran moved the final suitcase from the doorway, and placed it haphazardly on her side of the foyer. There was vast difference in the amount of possessions, even despite his vast property and her one bedroom, and Abigail stood out of breath against a wall, where she wiped the sweat from her brow with her sleeve.

"Well, I guess we'll have to unpack tomorrow," said Will.

The sky was black outside. The clock on the mantelpiece chimed eleven times. Abigail bent low to pick up a box labelled 'clothes and toiletries', before placing it on top another storage container that seemed filled with books and knick-knacks to personalise her space, and – with a yawn and a sigh – she hefted them high and balanced her chin on the rim of the box. The head was tilted back a little, as she struggled to see over her possessions. Abigail turned. A stumble nearly had her falling on her face and dropping the contents in her arms, but Will quickly dashed to her side and helped her to stand straight, as he looked her firmly in the eyes and said:

"You really shouldn't carry so much at once."

"Yeah, well, it gets the job done quicker," laughed Abigail. "I know I didn't really have much, and most of what I had is what Alana got for me, but there was a lot of stuff once everything was released from evidence . . . old books, photo albums, heirlooms . . . I know I could have used this as an excuse to get rid of everything from my old life, but -? I don't know. I might not need some of my parents' things, like my mom's jewellery, but it's nice to be close to them anyway . . ."

"You'll be closer to her still, if you fall down those stairs."

"Well, I'll just have to not fall then, won't I?"

Abigail spat out her tongue. It brought more laughter from Will . . . *vague memories of teasing his father, pulling faces before running off with giggles and cheers, being caught and hugged and kissed* . . . a smile broke across his face, as he took a bag of his night-clothes. He followed behind Abigail, as she moved through the house to the main stairwell. Hannibal remained close to them, with a storage box under one arm and a bag in his free hand, and his

bare feet padded along the tiled floors with soft patters. Abigail paused at the doorway, where her nose twitched and eyebrows furrowed, and – with half-smile – cocked her head to the kitchen and asked:

“Is that bread baking?”

Will shrugged, before he looked over his shoulder. Hannibal nodded with a polite smile, even as he seemed to visibly repress a yawn, and deposited the bag and box just to one side of the stairwell, where they would not provide a tripping hazard. Will followed his lead, while Abigail hovered between the staircase and lounge. The scent from the kitchen was rich and sweet, almost enough to cover the scent of his rut, but there was something else . . . something like raw honey and cinnamon . . . Will breathed it in deep, while Hannibal said in a warm voice:

“I thought you both may enjoy a nice home-cooked snack.”

“Yeah, but that’s *totally* the oldest trick in the book.”

“A ‘trick’? I do not understand.”

“I had this aunt once in real estate,” said Abigail. “Just before anyone would come to look at the house, she’d bake something in the oven . . . well, I say ‘bake’, as usually it was store-bought cookie dough thrown in and left there. The smell would go all around the house, but supposedly you smell it and go: ‘oh, this feels homely, I can see myself living here’.”

“*Can* you see yourself living here?”

“I . . . I can see myself *wanting* to live here.” Abigail winced. “It’s just hard, you know? I thought I’d always have a home with my folks, but then everything that happened sort of . . . I don’t know . . . it just leaves you afraid. If I thought I was safe before, and it all turned to crap, then what’s to stop it going wrong again? They say that you can’t get struck by lightning twice, but why not? You beat the odds the first time, so clearly your ‘luck’ meter is out of sync to start with, and being that statistical anomaly means you become a lightning rod.”

A brief wince broke across Abigail. The rosy tint to her cheeks faded, while his lips trembled, and her head lowered just enough to cast shadows about her eyes, which aged her beyond her teenage years more than any trauma to date. Will hunched forward, as he scratched awkwardly at the back of his neck and stared at the floor. The artificial lights were harsh when compared to the stars outside, and cast long shadows in his peripheral vision, which danced with eerie shapes and sizes until his hand was forced upward to shield his eyes. He looked back up to Abigail, who matched his gaze with an awkward smile, and a low exhale escaped from his mouth.

“We won’t let anything hurt you,” said Will. “You know that, right?”

“I know that’s what my dad said to me, yeah.”

Abigail sighed. The expression darkened, before she forced a smile. It failed to quite reach her eye, while her hands fidgeted about the edges of the boxes, and her head lowered just enough to hide her scarf and shoulders behind her possessions. Will stepped back. He half-turned his back to her, while she fussed and fidgeted and somehow found enough balance to pick up one of the bags from beside the door. Will turned back with a half-formed smile.

"Anyway, where am I putting these bags?"

"The ones marked 'Will – Bedroom'?" Will teased. "Gee, let me think . . ."

"Yeah, very funny, but you know what I mean," laughed Abigail. "I now there's a pretty big spare room next to mine, but there's other bedrooms in this place, too, and then there's the timing of the move . . . you know most people don't move during the first days of a rut, right?"

Will choked on the air itself. He spluttered and coughed, while Abigail wore a smirk that was as much devilish as it was playful, enough that a deep blush ran over Will's cheeks. Hannibal chuckled and busied himself about the lounge, as he brought in more boxes from the foyer to the bottom of the stairwell. Will cast his eyes between Abigail and Hannibal, but the silence continued as if waiting for him to speak first, and Will – with a low groan – ran his hands over his face and looked up at the painted ceiling. He dropped his hands to his hips.

"Okay, go do some unpacking, Abigail."

"Sure you don't need me to –"

"*Now*," laughed Will.

He pointed sternly up the staircase. Abigail moved as fast as she was able, with hands and arms filled with boxes and bags, and carefully made her way up each step, while Will watched from behind to make sure there were no falls or trips. He waited until she finally rounded the last step, before he walked slowly towards Hannibal and ran a hand though his hair. Will shrugged. The blush intensified across his cheeks, as he stopped just a few feet from Hannibal, and the rich and sweet sent broke through that of baked bread, enough to make his mouth water.

"I – ah – I'm sorry about that," said Will.

"There is no need to worry," replied Hannibal. "I am flattered that she would think it possible for you to be attracted to someone like me. I can understand the need for separate bedrooms now, but – in the future – were you to wish to perhaps share more of our living space -? Well, needless to say, I would not be averse to such an idea. I am sure we could live together well."

"Isn't that what we're doing right now? Living together?"

"Yes and no," said Hannibal. "Yes and no."

"Well, before we have *that* conversation, I kind of just want to unpack a few belongings, eat whatever it is you're serving with that bread, and pass out comatose on a soft bed, with a full

stomach and without having to worry about sleepwalking or nightmares or anything else. It's been way too long since I've woken up without sweats and panic attacks. I'm kind of tempted to share a room just for that fact alone . . . someone to wake me up, someone to stop me . . ."

Hannibal smiled. It was warm and bright. The sight alone sent a shiver down Will, who licked at his lips with a less than subtle gesture, and – averting his gaze – Will walked back out into the corridor, where he made his way toward the kitchen. He moved to the main kitchen counter, where he dropped his forearms onto the countertop. A computer-tablet sat just beside his hand, with the cover thrown open and a thumbprint doused with flour on the side, and Will half-smiled to see that its owner had clearly been reading mid-recipe. Hannibal followed him inside.

He swept around the other side of the counter, where he grabbed at a pair of oven-gloves. The movements were swift and elegant, with a burning familiarity of every inch of the kitchen, and – with a low hum – Hannibal took out the freshly baked loaf and placed it beside homemade jams and butters and sauces. Will breathed in deep. He pushed aside the tablet to make room for the inevitable plates, but his finger brushed against the screen: the device came to life. A flash of a logo and headline caught his attention. Will did a quick double-take, as he muttered:

"I never pegged you as a Freddie Lounds fan."

"I find it vital – for critical thinking skills – to read a selection of all materials," said Hannibal. "I often will read the same article from opposing newspapers and sources, simply to see all the issue from all sides and form a more well-rounded opinion. There is something quite frightening about only reading from those who agree with one's world-view, thus creating an echo-chamber."

"No, but . . . *wait*, is that -? Is that a third victim?"

"I have not fully read the article to know."

"Wait, let me read a little . . ."

Hannibal took a knife and slowly sliced the bread. The smile he wore was at odds with the tabloid article on the screen, which bore a barely censored photograph of a dismembered body stitched together to make a whole, and he carefully plated the light meal without any glance back towards the countertop. Will pulled the tablet before him, where the Tattler lit up the device with its gaudy colour scheme and awkward article layout. He forced slow and deep breaths.

The fast beating of his heart echoed in his head, even as Hannibal slid a plate before him, and the rich scent of honey on warm bread was almost a match for the scent of the heat . . . *seeping out of every pore, drifting through his mind like a lure* . . . Will picked at the bread, while his vision blurred with sparks of colour and distorted patterns. Hannibal stood the other side of the counter, where he ate slowly . . . *slow bobs of the Adam's apple* . . . Will shook his head and cursed. He ran his hands through his hair, while he turned his head to avoid the scents.

Hannibal leaned forward. The scent intensified, as Hannibal reached for the tablet, and his fingers lightly brushed against Will's hand, with a burning touch that brought a spark of electricity through every nerve. Will gasped. He jerked his hand away with the tablet in hand, while Hannibal froze with that same smile as before. Will shook his head and mumbled an apology, while Hannibal returned to his meal, and asked in a warm voice before his next bite:

"What does it say, Will?"

"It says: *'In recent months, a serial killer has stalked the streets of our city. He is unlike any other seen to date: ruthless, creative, and elusive. He has evaded capture, while seemingly taking his victims at random, claiming only one single trophy in the form of their intestines. Through all this, he has struck fear into the heart of every citizen in Baltimore. We flinch when we hear footsteps. We pick up speed when walking alone. We feel faint when seeing the shadows.*

'Now the Chesapeake Ripper has a new rival: The Jigsaw Killer.

'So named for the macabre way he dissects his victims into pieces, before piecing them back into a whole once more, this killer seems to strike in tandem with the Ripper. Is he a rival? An accomplice? We may never know; it seems that both have removed all traces of evidence to a forensic level. A sign, perhaps, that these killers have some form of legal connection?

'After all, the FBI are making no new leads on either case. How can it be that there is no surveillance footage, no fingerprints, no witness testimony? Now the Jigsaw Killer has struck again, leaving behind the head of Juan Garcia (a veteran of the gulf war and a celebrated police officer). Is this how we treat our army heroes? It seems the FBI would have us wait week by week for our loved one's body parts to be sent to us piece by piece.

'Our third "victim", if they can be called that when they contain the pieces of six individuals, has been found sitting in the chair of a lawyer . . . a lawyer whose arm forms a part of the current Jigsaw Man, named as Christina Solomon. It seems – yet again – several organs are missing from the torso, namely the liver and pancreas. That isn't all, however . . .'

Will pushed away the plate. He leaned forward with his weight on both arms, while every breath left him in short and fast pants, and – with eyes screwed shut – his hands fisted until nails drove into his palms and his knuckles turned white. The screen was so close to his face that every breath steamed the screen, and his brown locks of hair fell about his face, as his vision blurred and distorted with each passing second. A hand rested on his shoulder. He looked up. The plate across the counter was almost empty, while Hannibal now stood beside him and whispered:

"What else does it say, Will?"

"It says that they found a second body in the adjacent office," said Will. "The man was found with a Colombian Necktie, but – surprisingly – that's not what killed him . . . the guy was drained slowly of all his blood, which was found packed neatly beside him with a note asking that it be left to the Red Cross. The Jigsaw must have left his victim in response to the Ripper."

“You mean the jigsaw-body was left *after* the lawyer was killed?”

“According to Lounds? Yeah,” said Will. “The rest is speculation that the two killers know each other in real-life somehow, or – more ‘realistically’ – that one of them is a part of law enforcement, so that they have access to inside information, like noise complaints and 911 calls.”

“Ah, that will not incite distrust of the police department at all.”

“Nor will the fact ‘*it takes a murderer to catch a murderer’*.”

Will turned around, as he leaned against the counter. He threw back his head and stared upward, before he slammed a hand on the tablet and slid it across the counter, and Hannibal – with an impassive expression – took the device and turned it off. The case flipped closed, before it was placed away inside a drawer. Will brought his hands to his face. He drew in a staggered breath, as a sharp pain struck the side of his temple, and the dancing aura about his vision grew, until even the act of opening his eyes became a chore. He choked out in a broken breath:

“It ends with my name, as if I’m something to do with it.”

Hannibal brought his hand to a stubble-covered cheek. It was a gentle touch, which carefully tilted Will’s head towards him, and the movement exposed the length of his throat, in a way that left Will licking his lips and blushing deeper in response. Hannibal brushed his thumb lightly against the jaw, before he pulled back his hand with lingering fingers. The scent of his inner wrist was so sweet and aromatic that Will instinctively angled his head, until lips nearly brushed against the soft skin, and he winced to realise he was falling to baser instincts. Hannibal asked:

“Do you think that there could be competition between these killers?”

“I think it’s more and more likely that there’s something between them,” muttered Will. “I’d have to see the crime-scene before I could properly say for certain . . . I just – I don’t -! I mean, why didn’t Jack tell me about any of this? Am I that broken that he can’t even trust me? I get that I haven’t been on my game, but . . . I don’t know . . . I didn’t think that – . . .”

“Listen, Will. It has been a long day.” Hannibal smiled. “This killing occurred while you were still in Wolf Trap, did it not? Consider this a sign that you need a change of pace. You will not be alone here; it will give you time to heal . . . without these distractions.”

“The murders will still happen, won’t they?”

“Only those of the Ripper. The Jigsaw Killer’s victims are already dead, Will. I am sure that Jack will call you in, should there be anything that you can do, but I would otherwise suggest taking a break from such violence and horrors. You will be no good for Jack when you are so tired, let alone in a rut, and we must also treat this hormone imbalance of yours.”

“If I heal my mind, I’ll be able to solve these murders?”

“You will stand a far better chance, yes.”

Will scoffed, as he pushed himself back from the counter. He stumbled over his feet, as fatigue and arousal collided into a powerful wave about his abdomen, and his vision switched between blurred distortions and black emptiness. Hannibal darted forward. A strong arm came about his waist, where it pulled him tight against a firm and toned chest. The soft fabric of the patterned sweater almost lulled him into a sleep, as his mind grew hazy and his head grew light, but the rich scents and aromas made his mouth water. Hannibal guided him to the corridor.

“I think you need some rest,” said Hannibal.

“No, I – I’m fine. I just –”

“Let me show you to your room,” whispered Hannibal. “I believe some sleep will do you good; Abigail can tend to you during the night, if you need anything, as one alpha to another, and I will be in the master bedroom in case of emergency . . . I will give you space for the next few days, as – you may have noticed – my heat may have emerged in response to your rut.”

“I – I’m sorry, I just . . . I didn’t mean to –”

“Nonsense, allow me to help you however I can, Will.”

The walk was slow and sluggish. Will rested more of his weight upon Hannibal, as his head rested on a broad shoulder and his eyes fell half-closed, and the scent was strong enough that it brought with it many associations . . . *sweat-soaked sheets clinging to burning skin, eyes rolling back as the world turned white* . . . Will found his hand clutching at the arm around his waist, where he scratched and clawed, as half-formed words fell from his lips. He found his mind drifting . . . lost between dreams and reality . . . Will took in a deep breath.

“Thank you,” choked Will.

Hannibal turned off the lights as they walked. It cast a strange illusion of the light moving with them, or as if the darkness were chasing after them, and somewhere a faint sound of music drifted through an open door, like one who had fallen asleep mid-album. Will tried to focus on the lyrics . . . focus on the sounds . . . Hannibal led him to the base of the stairwell, before his hand came out to stroke against his cheek and his lips came in close to his ear. He whispered:

“There is no need to thank me yet, Will.”

Chapter 8

Will dropped down.

The mattress dipped with his weight. It was soft enough to mould to his body, providing perfect support and warmth, and – with a sigh – he half-closed his eyes, while he rested his hands clasped over his abdomen. A low sigh escaped him, as he stretched out over smooth sheets. It was a far cry from the springs that prodded and poked him in his old bedroom, with sheets bubbling from age and rough against bare legs, and it took all his energy to stay awake.

He remained limp and loose, while callused hands manoeuvred his limbs. The boots were pulled off along with socks, bringing back vague memories of his childhood, as his father would change him for bed after a long day playing to exhaustion, but it was different . . . somehow more intimate . . . the hands stroked along his legs, as they made their way to the waistband of his worn jeans. They brushed against the hair on his stomach, as fingers dipped beneath the rough cotton of his cheap shirt, and soon they unbuttoned his jeans and pulled them down.

Will pushed himself up onto his elbows.

A deep blush broke over his cheeks. Hannibal sat at the foot of the bed, where he slowly pulled down the fabric over thick and toned thighs, and – bending as he moved – his mouth was so close to his straining member that it proved a deeply erotic sight. The plump lips could have easily pressed against the tented boxers. They brought warm breath to the head. It brought shivers though Will, who attempted to cross his legs and sit further upright, but the gesture stopped the jeans from being lowered. Hannibal pinched his leg with a chuckle.

The pain brought a yelp from Will, who jerked back his leg to its original position. It was enough for the jeans to be fully removed, before Hannibal folded them neatly and placed them upon the ottoman, and – as he walked back to the bedside table – Will took a quick opportunity to pull the covers over his lower body, while lifting one leg to tent the quilt higher that of his erection. Hannibal tidied the bedside table with deft hands, while Will watched with blown pupils.

“You got me into bed pretty easily,” laughed Will.

“We must be the only couple to whom a child comes first and intercourse comes second.”

“Is that what’s next? ‘Intercourse’?”

Hannibal blushed. He kept one hand frozen over the analogue clock, which stood beside an old metronome and a vase of flowers, and Will made a mental note to personalise the bedroom once the bags were unpacked, changing it from a showroom to a live-in space. Hannibal sat at the edge of the bed. It dipped under his weight, forcing Will to roll onto his side, and – now facing Hannibal – the scent of the heat seemed all the stronger, as Hannibal

reached towards him and slowly undid the buttons to his shirt. The garment was soon folded alongside its brother.

It left his chest exposed, with smooth skin flushed with fever and arousal. He took in a hissed inhalation, while he clasped at the quilt and brought it up to his chin, and his lips fumbled over half-formed words, as he fidgeted and squirmed and fiddled with the hem of the quilt. Hannibal ran his eyes slowly from the top of Will's head to the feet that peeked out from the bottom of the covers, and slowly handed him an undershirt, which he donned quickly and without grace.

"You are a vision, Will," said Hannibal. "I look to you and I see a work of art; I could admire you for hours, like one would view a painted scene within a museum, and I would not lose interest for even one second, as you transcend the realm between reality and fantasy. That being said, you are deep in a rut . . . you cannot properly consent, much like if you were intoxicated."

"Wasn't it *you* that said that people have self-control?"

"We do. It is why I must decline any offer of intercourse at this time. If you had several glasses of wine, you would still be conscious and able to ask for a physical union, but I would still have to refuse on the basis that I want you to want me . . . no regrets, no questions . . ."

"I don't know what I want, no, but I know I won't regret one night."

"And what if I want more than one night? What if you won't?"

The last question was soft and broken. It was at odds with the usual stoic demeanour, especially when Hannibal looked away with a frown, and something struck Will deep in chest, almost like a physical blow. All breath left him. A sweat broke over him. The roll of his stomach brought a strange mixture of arousal and nausea, as he watched Hannibal slowly stand . . . *loose blond locks, pale and unblemished skin . . . lips wetted with a hint of tongue. . .*

Will snatched at his wrist. The skin was hot and smooth, sending a spark through every nerve and arousal straight to his groin. Will tugged at Hannibal, with just enough force to make clear his intentions, but Hannibal stumbled as if yanked with considerable strength. He threw out a hand onto the bedside table, where his fingers knocked against the metronome. It ticked by with a familiar four-four time signature. The sound broke though the silence and background noise, as the faint music from Abigail's bedroom continued to break on the edge of his consciousness, and Will apologised over and over, as Hannibal raised his hands in a placating gesture.

"I know my feelings about you haven't changed," said Will. "They've been complicated and conflicted, but they've only gotten stronger over time . . . I don't know about physically, but I know emotionally that I'm willing to give myself to you night after night."

"Will, please. Do not tempt me any more than I already am."

“Would it really be a bad thing just to give in? The only way to know if this can work is by trying it . . . together . . . if it doesn’t work, we’re both grown men, aren’t we? This can’t be the first one-night stand you’ve had. We just go back to being friends, chalk it up to an experience, and we move on with life, but still be a part of each others. It’s fine.”

“And what if we want different things? I know my sexuality, I know that this is something I would want long-term, Will, and I know that if you decide you want something else that it would break me. I can count the affairs I have had on one hand, and although you would be my first male partner, the total count still would not reach even five. Do you really think you can comprehend the emotional toll when you are so entrenched in your hormones?”

“Don’t,” warned Will. “Don’t act like I’m not mentally competent! I’ve spent my whole life with people making decisions for me, acting like I’m not able to think for myself just for being neurodivergent, but I know what this means, and I know . . . I know I want to give it a go . . .”

Will winced. He bit hard into his lip. The racing of his heart drowned out all other sounds, even the ticking of the metronome, and the thick and sweet scent added to the dizzying sensations, as he grew light-headed and fell almost into an eerie sense of ease. He pulled himself upright. He sat on his calves with legs parted in an almost obscene manner, while the covers were thrown back to reveal his body barely covered in simple boxers and an old t-shirt. Will leaned forward, with his lips parted and breaths in rapid pants. He reached up towards the woollen sweater.

Hannibal took in a sharp breath. It brought a shiver to Will, who ran his hands slowly over that slim – yet toned – body, and explored every curve and angle available, while he muttered desperate pleas that bordered on the incomprehensible. The metronome ticked out-of-sync with his heartbeat, which went ever faster and faster, until he finally found courage to kneel upward and pull Hannibal downward. They met midway, so that their lips were just a few inches apart.

“I – I want you inside me, Hannibal,” whispered Will. “I know it’s not something an alpha is meant to say . . . I – I know it’s not . . . I don’t know . . .” Will winced. “I just know that I trust you, and there’s no one else that I’d trust more . . . no one else I *want* to do this with . . .”

Will broke the distance between them. The press of their lips was electric; they were warm and soft, with a lingering touch that spoke of a far greater intimacy than any other physical act, and – for almost half-a-minute of the metronome – they simply remained still with lips touching and breaths shared. A dam broke inside of Will. He thrust himself toward Hannibal, with hands clinging and clawing at the fabric of his shoulders, and mewled in desperation.

The hint of tongue quickly turned into an exploration of his mouth, as Hannibal practically growled against him and dominated the kiss, and fingers buried themselves deep in his hair, while Will struggled to fight back the burning arousal. It brought him to full erection. The member pressed hard against Hannibal’s thigh; Will ground against him and used all his strength to pull him back against the bed, but nothing would move Hannibal from where he stood. A high-pitched keening sound escaped Will, as he begged and pleaded for more.

Hannibal pulled back. A breathless gasp fell from his lips, as he pulled Will's hands away from his sweater, and – with fast pants and guttural chokes – Hannibal guided Will back down against the mattress, before pulling the covers over his half-exposed form . . . *'no; please, don't leave me, not now'* . . . Will fought to drag Hannibal down to the mattress with him. Hannibal stepped quickly away by several steps. He pointed a finger vaguely towards Will and choked out:

"We can't do this now. I am not on birth control, and I imagine neither are you. The chance of pregnancy is far lower with an alpha, especially at your age, but it is not a guarantee. I also would wish for something more romantic for our first time. Let us wait until the rut is over . . ."

Will fought against the blankets and quilts. He begged and pleaded, each sound running into the next until it became nothing but gibberish, but Hannibal was already in the doorway, with his hand against the light-switch. It was decided. Tears pricked at Will's eyes . . . *'no, no, no'* . . . Hannibal rapidly blinked, as if fighting away tears, and clicked the switch with a sound that almost hid the broken gasp from his throat. The darkness descended.

The metronome emitted a sharp light, one that flashed bright in time with the ticking sound, and Will flung an arm over his forehead to shield his eyes. It was the light from the hallway that softened the flashes and made them bearable, taking away some of the focus and intensity, and yet there was something about it . . . *disorientating* . . . *confusing* . . . Will swayed, even as he fought to sit upright, but already Hannibal was halfway between bedroom and hallway. The door was mostly closed, only leaving the looming and shadowy figure of Hannibal. He whispered:

"I have not offended you, have I, Will?"

"I'll live," muttered Will.

The door closed. Will shoved down a scream, as arousal and anger mingled in equal measure, and his throat ached with the force of his self-restraint. The darkness seeped into every corner of the bedroom, with shadows stretching and growing and transforming under the harsh from the bedside table. It pierced into his vision . . . sharp and painful, like a scalpel through flesh . . . Will closed his eyes, as he dropped back down onto the mattress. He screwed them shut tight.

He took in slow and breaths. He choked back the broken cries. The fatigue seeped into every muscle and every vein, while his head grew light and his mind grew hazy, and sleep slowly threatened to break through the turmoil, claiming him to his nightmares. He jerked back away. He focused on the lights and sounds, struggling to stay awake, as arousal slowly faded in and out with the mixture of combating emotions, and again sleep crept ever closer . . . *in and out, in and out* . . . it moved with an eerie rhythm, as the world around him faded from view . . .

A figure reappeared in the doorway . . . *dark, shadowy* . . . *a faceless face that defied logic and reason* . . . the room was cold, with the blankets thrown off his heated flesh . . . *antlers broke from the head of the creature* . . . *the stag* . . . *the man* . . . Will closed his eyes again. He drew in slow and deep breaths . . . *cold hands wrapped around his wrists, until fingers*

turned to tendrils and tendrils merged with ropes, and soon the world was sinking away . . . falling . . . sweat soaked the mattress . . . *water slowly seeped across the sheets, until the mattress sank . . .*

He was drowning. The mattress dipped lower and lower, while the cold waters came higher and higher, and – as he opened his eyes – blackness was the only thing that greeted him, slowly becoming one with the sound of lapping waters about his ears. It seeped over his skin. It ran over his mouth, until he was swallowing bitter waters . . . waters filling his mouth . . . choking, spluttering . . . they spilled forth and ran outward . . . they carried on and on and on . . .

Will finally broke free. He lurched forward.

The air was icy cold, like frost against bare skin. He could see his breath before him, where it formed in slow and thick clouds that evaporated as soon as they were made, and his skin – numb and pale – was covered in goose-bumps and small scratches. Will struggled to focus his gaze. He looked down. The soles of his feet were black and red, from dirt and blood, and there was mud all over his lower legs and caked onto his feet and ankles. A sharp light flashed at him.

It stopped approximately ten or fifteen feet ahead. He brought his hand up to shield his eyes, as he cast his eyes from left to right . . . *a hedge on the left, blocking off farmland from sight, and field as far as the eye could see on the right* . . . he looked down at the tarmac. It was a road. He furrowed his brow as he tilted back his head, but above were only stars that twinkled in a way rarely seen in the city, and that reminded him all too much of home before Hannibal. Will rubbed at his eyes . . . *headlights from a small car . . . a shadowy figure standing before him . . .*

He blushed, as he wrapped his arms around his torso. The t-shirt clung to him with sweat, while the shorts barely kept his modesty, and he was exposed to a stranger on a dark road, deep in a rut and lost in the middle of nowhere. He lowered his head. He staggered towards them, with sharp and searing pain shooting through the soles of his feet, and several times he nearly slipped to the ground. Will moved towards the figure . . . *nowhere to run, better hope for the best . . .*

“Will? Oh, thank God!”

It was a familiar voice. Will blinked. He took a step back, as the shadowy figure ran towards him, they gained shape and semblance before him, before his heart could even gain a beat, and the shadows broke through the light to bring recognition: Beverly. Will dropped down. A long exhale escaped him, as tears pricked at his eyes and distorted his vision, and only her arms . . . soft, firm, steady . . . stopped him from collapsing against the road itself.

Beverly guided him towards the open passenger door. He sat without resistance, allowing her to lift his legs inside and manoeuvre his arms like a ragdoll. The clothes she wore were unusual, enough to register through the fog and despair as pyjamas with ankle-boots and a leather jacket, and her hair was down and loose, with only a cursory brush to smooth away tangles. The heater in the car was on full blast, so that – as the door closed – warm air blew

over his cold skin, and he was finally able to draw in a choked breath. He dropped his head back against the headrest.

“How did you -?” Will blinked. “Where is -?”

The door on the driver’s side opened, as Beverly climbed inside. He let his head loll to the side, while Beverly muttered a series of incomprehensible complaints, and leaned over to help him with his seatbelt, before preparing herself for a long drive. Will watched her without truly seeing her, as his eyes struggled to focus . . . there was blurred movement, a series of actions, but nothing that could be connected to her person. He was numb. There was no feeling in his limbs, no feeling in his body . . . Beverly waved a hand in front of his face and spat:

“What the hell are you *doing* here, Will?”

“I – I don’t know.” Will smiled through tears. “I was tired from moving boxes all day. We only got the last of our stuff into the house around eleven o’clock, and I was glad that her hospital room and my home were both empty, but . . . I was in a rut, I was disorientated . . . Hannibal put me to bed, before he went away, and I think I fell asleep? I . . . I was dreaming . . .”

“Dreaming? About what?”

“It doesn’t matter. I must have sleepwalked again, but . . . the whole point of moving in with Hannibal was to avoid all this . . . I thought someone would have heard me, or seen me, or checked in on me? How did I get here? Where even am I?”

He struggled to focus his gaze. A tear ran down his cheek, where it caught at the corner of his mouth, and the taste was bitter and familiar . . . his mouth was dry . . . Beverly finally shifted into something he could recognise, as her facial features became noticeable. The curl of her lips was at odds with the softened eyes, and the flush to her cheeks failed to match her flared nostrils . . . *disgust and relief, pity and respect* . . . Will laughed at nothing, as he fought to decipher her expression. Beverly turned away. A low sigh echoed about the car, as she turned on the ignition.

“Let’s go, Will,” said Beverly.

The car came to life, as she drove at a reasonable speed. He rolled his heavy head forward, where he watched the tedious black road blur past them, and let his fingers pick and pull at the leather of the seat, as his hands remained too heavy to lift away from the seat. Beverly awkwardly reached behind her to the back-seat, before pulling out an old shirt and pair of jeans. They belonged to a man. The size was too big for him, while they still had the scent of cologne on them. He vaguely remembered seeing a photograph on her desk once . . . *arm in arm with a young man, both smiling and laughing* . . . he put them on, while Beverly muttered:

“I got a call from some Bedelia woman?”

“Hannibal’s psychiatrist?”

“Yeah,” said Beverly. “It started when Abigail called me first. It seems that she woke up in the night to huge crash, turns out you were sleepwalking and bashed into some display of Japanese armour or something? You wouldn’t wake up, even when she tried to wake you, and just . . . wandered off, I guess. It freaked her out bad, though. You were dressed like you are right now.”

“Why didn’t she get Hannibal for help?”

“Couldn’t find him,” sighed Beverly. “He left your room about thirty minutes later, though, like he’d been sleeping in there or something? See, this is why I *knew* it was a bad idea for you two to move in during a rut and a heat! You two were doing it, weren’t you? Come on, ‘fess up.”

“No, he – he left . . . I propositioned him, but he left.”

“So what was he doing for so long in your room?”

“I don’t know,” choked Will. “Maybe he was checking in on me? He can be pretty thorough when he feels like he has a responsibility to someone . . . I once found him asleep at Abigail’s bedside, when she was in hospital, maybe he did the same with me?”

“Well, anyway, he refused to speak to Abigail. He just apologised and said that he needed to leave, and she figured that he was following after you, as she’d have been panicked, too, to wake up and realise you’d just gone walkabouts. The thing is that time passed and *neither* of you came back. I told Abigail to go back to sleep, then came to look for you guys.”

Will reached for his phone. It was gone. He winced and half-smiled at what should have been obvious, while his trembling hands smoothed back down the pockets of the jeans, and every breath came out jerked and shallow, as his head rolled from side to side. The tremble to his lips was all too obvious . . . *Abigail startled by his sleep-walking, Hannibal searching for him in a panic despite his heat* . . . Will half-lifted his hand and dropped it again. He opened his mouth and closed it again. Beverly looked at him with concern, as he muttered in a low voice:

“How’d you find me?”

“That part was easy,” laughed Beverly. “I drove to your place and drove down the roads you’d take to get to Wolf Trap; you’re lucky I spotted you! Jesus, Will, you must have been walking for full on a whole hour. It’s a miracle I found you and not some axe-wielding serial killer.”

“How would he be wielding an axe *and* driving?”

“Maybe he’s walking the same route?”

“If we both walk roughly the same speed, we wouldn’t have met.”

“Unless he was walking from the other direction.”

“What? On the off-chance he *might* find someone past midnight walking a deserted road?”

Beverly spat out her tongue. It was a childish gesture, one that made her seem younger than her years, and a burst of broken laughter fell from his lips, as he turned his head again to watch her as she drove without a shred of anxiety about the darkness. The lights of the cityscape were getting closer as they drove ahead, with the stars overhead growing dull and weak. He swallowed back a hard lump in his throat. It was almost audible, with a sharp pain like swallowing a bone, and he half-closed his eyes, as he fought to concentrate on her words. Beverly continued:

"Anyway, that was when Bedelia rang me."

"Why did she ring you?"

"Hannibal stopped by her house," said Beverly. "She was concerned, because you know what he's like . . . only time he *doesn't* have wax and gel in his hair is when he's ready for bed or just woken up, and he wasn't even in a suit, but like chilling-at-home clothes. I didn't get the whole story, because apparently he was pretty upset and not really talking much, but –"

"But what? Did I hurt him? Did I – Did I do something wrong?"

"No? Maybe? I don't think so." Beverly furrowed her brow. "He wasn't saying much, or she didn't tell me what was said, but he was mumbling something about you and finding you and worried that you were hurt or would hurt yourself . . . he asked that she ring Jack, but – don't ask me *why* – when she took his phone from him, she rang me instead. I think she said it'd be more discrete or something. I didn't even know your boyfriend had my number."

"He's not my boyfriend," mumbled Will.

"So you won't want to stop by Bedelia's house and check on him, then?"

Will quirked an eyebrow. He cast his eyes over the road, where signs flashed into life as if from nowhere, and the word 'Baltimore' practically glowed on the metal, forcing him to look away with a soft wince. Will pressed a finger to his temple . . . *flashes of light like headlights, loud beating noises like his heart* . . . the more he tried to remember, the more he forgot, and the more the sickening nausea burned at the back of his throat. It was acidic. It was hot. He drew in slow hissed breaths, as the tears returned, and found enough strength to whisper:

"Can we go check on Hannibal?"

A smile broke over Beverly, as she turned to wink at him. He almost smiled back, but the numbness slowly crept down and out of his limbs . . . the stinging pain burned at his feet, while his joints ached with a throbbing sensation, and his chest felt bruised and torn, as if something had struck him while out on the road. Tears fell from him. The expression changed on Beverly, as the smile gave way to despondency, and her tone grew soft and serious, as she said:

"I'm already on our way . . ."

Chapter 9

Chapter Notes

Trigger Warning in end-notes

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Will stood alone.

He looked back to the vehicle. Beverly sat warming her hands over the radiator, as snow started to settle over the windscreen, and the light from her phone illuminated her face, which bore flushed cheeks and a reddened nose. The interior was a strong temptation, as he waited on the porch with the cold chill piercing the shirt a good size too large. He drew in a deep breath. A sharp knock at the door brought a rapping pain to his knuckles and stung his skin.

The door opened with only a few seconds to wait. It swung open to reveal a mature woman in an expensive dressing-gown, which brushed against bare ankles and feet hidden in matching slippers, and her hair was long and loose about her shoulders. *Bedelia*. The expression she wore was impassive and difficult to decipher, and yet – on sight of him – her nostrils flared and he chin came upward, like one who had caught a bad scent. Will looked over his shoulder. The lights were off for most of the house, save for one side-room and part of the hallway.

He stepped forward, as he pushed her back with a firm hand. It was enough to move her aside, but not enough to harm or offend, and – with heart racing, sweat breaking – he raced forward through the corridor, while he looked rapidly from left to right in search of Hannibal. The light guided him like a beacon, as he stumbled over bare feet that left specks of blood from reopening wounds. He threw a trembling hand out onto the walls to keep upright.

“Is he here?” Will asked. “What happened?”

Will found the entryway to the office. He turned. The room was cast in shadows, with most light coming from various lamps and candles scattered about the desks, and a figure sat in an expensive chair at the far end of the office, where they hunched like a black silhouette. Will stepped towards them. They lifted their head. The features of Hannibal slowly broached into his vision, as those hazel eyes stared at him wide and bloodshot with a sheen of tears.

Hannibal jumped upright. He moved quickly around the chair, where he hunched forward and rested his hands on its back, and – in the darkness – the loose sweater seemed to envelop him until he lost all shape and form. The shadows emphasised the lines about his face, aging him beyond his years, and the colour seemed drained from his face, as his hands held so tightly to the chair that the fabric made a noise beneath his fingers. Will stepped forward. Hannibal

tensed and pulled back, while a sharp intake of breath hissed through the office. Will forced out:

“Are – Are you okay?”

A firm hand took a hold of his upper arm, before pulling with some force. Will struggled to keep balance, as Bedelia led him through the dark halls towards the kitchen, and her hand only left him once they reached the main countertops. He leaned back against the marble, as she flicked on a lamp in the far corner and let it partially illuminate the room. A digital-clock lit the time on a far appliance: 4:23. Will winced and ran his hands over his face with a groan.

“What’s going on?” Will asked. “Why can’t I see him?”

“Is Beverly with you, Will?”

Bedelia took two crystal glasses. A decanter was taken from the side, where it lay half-empty and among several plates ready to be washed, and – without looking in his direction – poured the thick red liquid into both glasses with slow and graceful movements. He took the wine that was handed to him, while Bedelia sipped leisurely at her glass with both hands. The dressing gown lapel was open just enough to reveal a hint of an expensive nightdress, while the scent of her perfume almost masked that of leftover food and alcohol from an early get-together.

“She’s waiting in the car,” said Will. “Why?”

“I specifically asked that she take you home.” Bedelia sipped at her glass. “It is better that we deal with this matter once all involved have . . . shall we say . . . calmed down from their high emotions. You are coming out of a rut, are you not? I can smell it on you. I can smell it on you, just as I can smell the ending heat that emits from Hannibal. It is a recognisable scent.”

“What – What has my rut got to do with –”

“You know too well that a rut will affect your hormones. You know, too, that you have been unwell as of late . . . it is the early hours of the morning, and sleep deprivation with fevers and hormones do little to make one of a sound mind. This is not the time to address any issues with Hannibal. If we are to use one of his analogies: if a teacup has shattered, the damage is done, and so why does it matter when we sweep away the pieces, so long as they are swept?”

A tremble ran through Will. He placed a hand on top of the glass, so that the wine would fail to spill over the rim, and the lukewarm liquid warmed his cold flesh, like specks of blood dripping from an open wound. Will drew in several deep breaths, as his eyes lost focus and specks of colour drifted in and out of his vision. Bedelia sipped at her wine. The impassive features were at odds with his bobbing Adam’s apple and twitching upper-lip, and his face contorted in search of the right words, until – with a barely audible whisper – he asked:

“Did I . . . break him?”

Bedelia took in a long breath, followed by another sip. The glass was soon placed carefully beside the decanter, before Bedelia walked with a slow pace towards the kitchen entrance, and she leaned against the doorframe, before folding her arms and looking outward. He slammed down his glass in turn, before walking swiftly across the room to her side. Will followed her gaze into the corridor. A shadow danced about the floor, as Hannibal seemingly moved from within the office, but the shadow was distorted . . . hunched . . . Will swallowed and asked:

"Why did you ring Beverly and not Jack?"

"I listen to what Hannibal says about you, Will," said Bedelia. "I listen to what he says about those around him, as it is a part of my job as his psychiatrist, and I also learn to read between the lines and interpret the silences that say more than his words. I had a feeling that Jack would escalate matters and force an immediate resolution, and – with his reactionary and explosive personality – might make matters worse for both yourself *and* for Hannibal."

"So something is wrong . . . it's wrong . . ."

"It will do us no good to jump to conclusions. I also believe it unbeneficial to shame a potential victim and to add guilt to a potential culprit. It may be better to assume that, perhaps, roles may be reversed or that both may be victims of biology and sickness . . . needless to say, I would not have a sensitive situation dealt with by shouting matches and chaotic gatherings."

"'Shouting matches'? 'Chaotic gatherings'?" Will scoffed. "You mean like having a group of officers around? Interrogations? Forensic evidence? Statements? You're . . . you're making it sound like . . . why – why would there be any victims? Who is even the victim?"

"Who do you feel is the victim here, Will?"

Will buried his face in his hands. He paced back and forth. The soles of his feet dragged across the cold floor, adding to his pain and the sharp discomfort, and the sound of slapping skin echoed out through the silence. The beating of his heart beat out loud, until his chest burned with a searing sensation that scorched at his flesh. It was too fast. It sped to the point it felt like it stopped, stealing his breath and lodging in his throat, and tears welled with each thump. He laughed through the tears. He scratched at his head. A mumbled voice forced out:

"I feel . . . I feel violated."

"Why?"

"I don't remember what happened," choked Will. "I have images bordering on hallucinations, but the rest is a blur. I was walking down a deserted road in nothing but my underwear . . . exposed, vulnerable . . . I could have been hurt, raped, killed . . . even just lost. I feel like . . . like the world knows more about me than I know about myself. I feel weak. I feel . . . *scared*."

He stopped in the centre of the strange kitchen. The bare feet were sore and bloody, while the trousers hung down over his ankles and threatened to trip him with each step. The shirt

swamped him enough to remind him that it belonged to another man. A thick scent cloyed in the air . . . *a fading heat, alcohol, leftover food* . . . he panted though the tears, which slid down his cheeks and onto his lips. The bitter taste lingered. He wiped roughly at his face and looked over his shoulder, where Bedelia refused to make eye-contact and continued to stare ahead. Will asked:

“If I go in there, what’s he going to say?”

“The best way to cure fear is to face fear,” whispered Bedelia. “If the violation comes from others seeing you at your weakest, and knowing what you have done before you have been made aware of your actions, then the best thing to be done is to learn all you can of what happened.”

“An equal footing? I feel like you’re asking me to build a defence . . .”

“I’m asking you to remain alert, Will.”

Bedelia turned. The brief eye-contact was matched with a warm smile, before she gestured towards the corridor and held her hand outward. Will dropped his shoulders and dragged his feet, as he moved towards the office with heavy movements of his legs, and Bedelia – with a soft sigh – followed several paces behind. He stopped once he reached the office. Will turned. He kept his eyes screwed closed, while he took in deep and fast breaths, and shook his head.

A soft hand on his shoulder shocked his system. He threw open his eyes. Hannibal stood at some distance, far across the room with his hands wrapped around the edge of a polished wood desk, and the lamp behind him – white shade, high position – cast a dark shadow over his features. The marks down his cheeks shone in the low light, like the tears that marked Will in turn. The clothes he wore were the same as earlier in the evening. Will stepped forward. Hannibal jerked his head and upper body back. He practically pressed himself against the desk, as knuckles turned white with the force of his hold against the wood. Will asked in a breathless tone:

“Are you okay?”

“I believe there is no physical damage,” said Hannibal.

The tone was slow and monotone. Will cursed. He pushed his fingers into his eyes, as he paced back and forth at the edge of the office, before a warm hand guided him to an armchair. It pushed him down against the fabric. He sat opposite Hannibal, while tears streamed down his cheeks, and Bedelia – without a single word let her hand linger on his shoulder, before she walked slowly to the side of the room and waited . . . watched . . . Will bit into his lip. The taste of iron flooded his mouth, while the sharp pain grounded him. He took in a long breath.

“What did -?” Will winced. “What did I do to you?”

“You do not remember?”

“I – I remember you leaving my bedroom,” choked Will. “I remember the door closed and the metronome was annoying me, and I could have sworn it was flashing at me, too, like this light in the darkness . . . I was hallucinating . . . I saw someone above, holding me down, and then I was suddenly awake on the main road back to Wolf Trap. My feet were cut bloody from the walk.”

“So . . . what happened between us . . . that is a blur for you?”

“‘What happened between us’? Nothing happened between us.” Will winced. “I offered myself to you, but you told me that it wouldn’t be right . . . you wanted to wait . . . I fell back on the mattress to sleep once you left. I might have tried to tried to follow you any other time, but . . .”

Will stood. He paced back and forth along an imaginary line, while his hands chopped and clawed at the air as if in search of purchase, but – through all his gesticulations – the heavy weight in his stomach built until nausea threatened to turn to vomit. It was already thick and acidic on the back of his tongue, while his throat struggled to swallow back the forming lump. He let his feet slap against the floor, while he avoided the gazes of both Bedelia and Hannibal, and soon he stopped behind the chair, where he pressed his hands to its back and spat:

“What did I do? I need to know, Hannibal.”

A low hiss of breath escaped Hannibal. He stepped forward. The fingers on the edge of the table fell limply away from the wood, before he came around to the chair opposite Will, and – with a visible wince – sat down on the soft fabric. Hannibal half-stood. He paused. He descended once again, but leaned slightly to his right and folded both legs and arms, before he fixed his gaze on a distant spot somewhere across the office. The words that followed were barely audible:

“You forced yourself on me, Will.”

Will fell weak. The strength in his muscles vanished, as he all but collapsed forward, and only the back of the chair helped keep him upright. All colour drained from his face. The contractions of his throat brought bile rising upward, until a trembling hand covered his mouth to hold back the sickness that he was forced to choke down, and tears streamed afresh down his cheeks, until bloodshot eyes could take no more. Will dropped his head. He clutched at his stomach, which let loose a searing pain that threatened to bring him to his knees. Will cried out:

“No, I would have –”

“I thought that Abigail’s music may disturb you,” said Hannibal. “I went to ask her to turn down the volume, but she was passed out from exhaustion . . . I tended to her. It took some time to remove her boots and accessories, as well as to tuck her into bed and turn off the various devices, but soon she seemed comfortable and all was quiet. I went back to check on you.

“You appeared to be asleep, but also disturbed. You were writhing on the bed, talking about shadows and water and stags, and I – I reached to your forehead . . . I wanted to check for a fever. You complained about being so sick as of late. I touched you . . . you lurched.”

Hannibal wiped at a stray tear.

“You flung me down against the mattress. I tried my best to fight against your advances . . . I clawed at your chest and I slapped you to awaken you, but you continued despite my best attempts at self-defence. You flipped me over and succumbed to your rut. I lay there for some time afterward, but you merely tucked yourself away and left the room. I waited. You did not return. I redressed and came straight here . . . I needed somewhere safe . . .”

“That – That’s not what I remember . . . I didn’t – I *couldn’t* -!”

“I know what happened, Will, for I was the one to endure the experience.”

Will dropped to his knees. He buried his hands into his hair, where fingers clawed at his scalp, and every breath came out fast and hard . . . flashes of images broke over his vision . . . they overlapped the world around him, like the film of an overhead projector held up against reality, and soon his eyes unfocused and failed to separate one from the other. He thought back . . . he hunched over, while his mind whirled and memory stirred . . . his heart raced . . .

The door opened. A tall figure lingered in the doorway. It was handsome . . . perfectly formed, perfectly poised . . . it stalked towards him; a sway to its hips, a sweet scent emitting from every pore . . . it pulled off a sweater with both hands. The torso bore taut and toned muscles, with silky smooth skin and a scattering of greying hair, and the heat from the body stroked over every inch of his body, like a physical touch. He was over Will . . . too quick . . . a blur . . . the creature was naked, with inky black thighs on either side of his waist . . . antlers stretching out ahead . . .

A warmth encircled his member. It sent electricity through every nerve. He gasped. He jerked. He brought his body upward, but firm and strong hands pushed him back down . . . something wrapped around his wrists . . . almost bruising, but not quite . . . one hand, one hoof, one tendril . . . the other was behind, milking him and massaging him . . . a heat touched soft on the head. It was familiar, yet different. It swallowed him as it moved down and down . . . he was inside the man . . . the creature . . . overwhelming pleasure and terror . . .

‘No,’ cried out a voice. ‘No, not like this.’

The pressure was immense. It was tight like a glove around him, with clenching that was just right . . . just enough . . . his heart raced, his mouth ran dry, and soon the thing was moving on top of him, as if riding him and owning him. He tossed his head back and forth. The pleasure sent waves of ecstasy through every nerve, tingles down his spine and every muscle, and yet the figure was distorted . . . transformed . . . wrong . . . there was no control, no comprehension, just a series of sensations and sights happening to him, not with him or for him.

It threw back its head, as it let go of his wrists. It picked up speed, with small grunts and incoherent sounds, and Will lifted a weak hand to push it away . . . the hand fell midway

without strength or energy or the will to continue . . . it fell limp over his head. The creature growled out in some alien tongue . . . it raked its talons down his chest, drawing blood, and strange strangled sounds bubbled and boiled out its mouth. A sweat broke over Will . . . tears . . . panic . . .

Will panted. He sat back on his feet. A pair of trembling hands took the hem of the shirt and lifted it up, along with the vest beneath, and slowly . . . clearly . . . eight parallel marks appeared on his skin, with a red still metallic and fresh. He dropped the shirt with a half-mangled scream. He fell back. Will scrambled to his feet, as he crawled and stumbled over to a far wall, and looked between Bedelia and Hannibal with quivering eyes. Hands fumbled over the doorway, as he darted back and forth from one foot to the other. He gasped. He spat. He mumbled:

"I – I didn't – I thought . . ."

"I needed space, Will," whispered Hannibal. "I never thought you would come here, but if you do not remember . . . if you truly have no recollection . . . it would make sense that you would come to me out of concern. I had wanted Bedelia to call Jack; I thought you may have been a danger to yourself or others, and – despite what you did – I wanted you to be safe . . ."

"I . . . no . . . *no*, that's not -!" Will pulled at his hair. "I have vague memories, sure, and – and – and they kind of match what I hallucinated, too . . . you – *you were on top of me*! I – I couldn't have taken advantage, could I? If you were riding me, it had to be consensual or –"

"It was a hallucination, Will. You threw me face-down onto the sheets . . . you took me from behind . . . I can still feel your breath on my neck, your teeth on my skin . . . I want nothing more than to wash away the touches, the sensations, the feeling of dirt . . . contamination . . . I feel used, Will, but more than that -? I feel that I failed you. I feel that I failed myself. I should have listened to Bedelia and Alana; I should not have tended to you in your heat."

"You – You clawed me in pleasure. It – It wasn't –"

"I never in my life believed that I would feel that violation." Hannibal let loose a staggered sigh. "It is something we are always taught as omegas . . . we are taught not to walk alone at night, we are taught not to go to close to a car door when giving directions, we are taught never to go to a second location when attacked . . . still, we are never taught to fear those that we love."

The final words struck Will hard. He saw nothing but Hannibal. He cast his eyes towards the man whose hand hid his face, as if keeping the trembling lips and tears from sight, and he saw how hunched Hannibal looked . . . how faint, how weak . . . how *broken*. Will reached a hand toward him. It could never break the distance, but still he stretched until his shoulder ached and his hand grew numb. The tears were hot against his skin. Hannibal refused to meet his gaze, but instead hugged himself with one arm and continued to hold at his face. Will choked:

"I – I . . . I really hurt you?"

A loud sniff echoed out. Hannibal wiped at his face, as his lips contorted into a broken smile, and – finally – he looked directly to Will with hazel eyes shimmering with tears. The colour was gone, making his stubble more prominent. He looked beyond his years. A stray tear rolled down his face and lost itself against his lips, where it left a shine of moisture and otherwise vanished into the shadows, and Hannibal drew in a deep breath, before a whispered voice choked:

"You raped me, Will."

Time stopped. The words struck him hard. Will let loose a few choked breaths, but soon he ran . . . *he ran* . . . he barely made it to the kitchen sink, as his stomach contracted and throat tightened, and acid burned his tongue, as his stomach contents emptied. He retched and gagged, until there was nothing left . . . his heart raced, a cold sweat broke over his forehead . . . his fingers clenched and closed of their own accord. He pressed them to the marble, as he sought to keep them open . . . unable to control his body . . . his throat ached and burned.

The word 'no' spilled from his mouth like a mantra. He turned his hands inward . . . they shook to the point of blurring in his vision, while his fingers continued to curl inward, and – as he slid down onto the marble – he clawed and scratched and punched at his body . . . *'no, no, no'* . . . he sobbed and wept. The world was distorted. He struggled to see . . . struggled to breathe . . . someone held at his wrists with warm and soft touches. It was as if they sought to restrain him. He screamed. They scurried away. He writhed and twisted on the floor, as he begged:

"I – I need more tests . . ."

"Will, you need to calm down," said a feminine voice.

"N-No! I – . . . did I really do that?" Will sobbed. "I'm a danger to others. Why – *Why* didn't you call Jack? I should . . . I should be in jail right now . . . they – they told me this was a hormone imbalance! H-How can a hormone imbalance mess with your head enough that you rape someone and not even r-remember? I'm sorry . . . *I'm sorry* . . . *I'm sorry, I'm sorry* . . ."

"Listen to my voice," said Bedelia. "*Breathe*."

"W-Why? So – So you can have me draw a clock?" Will laughed. "I'm sorry! I – I don't even . . . I – I could swear – I could swear it was consensual . . . I didn't even realise we had . . . *I'm sorry, I'm sorry, I'm sorry* . . . oh, god, I'm so sorry . . . please – please don't –"

The kitchen grew cold . . . oppressive . . . like ice over bare flesh. He struggled to see through his narrowing vision . . . like looking through a tunnel, where the entrance grew further and further away . . . the tremble extended through his hands to his arms and to his shoulders and to his back, until his whole body shook and jerked and twitched. He fought to speak, but his throat closed . . . *no longer his body, no longer his control* . . . his head struck hard on tile, while he saw only bare ankles and silk slippers. He tried to lift his head. It jerked. It remained down.

'Hannibal? Hannibal, call an ambulance!'

A rustle of fabric. A push of something beneath his head. It struck again and again on something soft, while the blood seeped into the material, and every fumbled utterance came out as incoherent gibberish, as his heart pounded loud and deafened all sounds. He choked on saliva and bile. His body contorted and stretched to breaking point, until his joints and muscles seemed to seize and lock, and finally his eyes rolled back, eliminating all sight at last.

It was as if the world ceased to exist.

Chapter End Notes

Trigger Warning: frank discussions of non-con, references to non-con, and panic attacks

The references are in flashback form, which will be in italics; please avoid formatted sections for references to non-con

Chapter 10

‘You need to rest, Will.’

The monitor beeped a slow and steady pace. A cool breeze came in through the open window, which rustled at the net curtains that distorted the view beyond, and – as Will hissed – a pair of dark hands pulled the thick blankets up to his shoulders. They tucked him in with a surprisingly gentle touch, and lightly brushed his forehead with the back of callused fingers. The skin felt cold against him. He groaned and instinctively leaned into the hand. The owner sighed.

Will focused his gaze, as Jack slowly came into view. He stood just to the edge of the bed, blocking the machine from sight, and the light from the window cast a bright aura around him, but darkened him to the point that his features became obscured. Will tried to lift his arm. It was heavy and strained, with a sharp ache where a canulla sat on the back of his hand, and he dropped it back onto the crisp white sheets. Jack sat on the edge of the bed. The mattress dipped under his weight, as he took Will’s hand and held it with a small squeeze. Will choked out:

‘You – You don’t know what I did . . .’

‘I don’t need to know what you did and I don’t want to know,’ said Jack. ‘All I know is you’ve got a hormone imbalance, coming out of a rut, and your endocrinologist reckons you could have some underlying infection. I need you to be at your best, Will; it’s not just about work, but about not wanting my friend to go into a seizure and be stuck in a coma for a week, all while risking permanent brain damage!’

‘Who knew you were so protective?’

‘You know, you can be really *rude when you’re afraid, Will. I want you to stay here at least overnight and let them get your hormone therapy on track, but – more than that – I want you to promise me that you’ll stay here and chase up this mess with further tests and antibiotics, alright?’*

Will let his head roll on the pillow. The cold material was a small comfort on hot skin, as he chased ever after the fleeting moment, and yet – as soon as he found the cold – it would soon warm again and be lost to him. A heavy scent of disinfectant lingered in the air, something thick and heavy and a far cry from the dogs and freshly cooked fish and motor oil of home. He held back a broken laugh. A tremble to his lips, and a movement to his throat, had Jack holding a little tighter at his hand. He squeezed back and forced out in a weak voice:

‘They did every test imaginable. They found nothing.’

‘Then you let them do them again!’

The breeze picked up from the window, where it knocked over a card. A row of them sat on a high table, one on wheels designed for a hospital bed just like the one he occupied, and –

with a frown – he cast a slow eye over each one. He was not aware he knew so many people. Jack simply sat still on the edge of the mattress, while his nostrils flared with every breath. He kept his hand on Will's, and stared off into a far corner, while Will turned his gaze upward.

A silence descended . . .

* * *

"I didn't think you'd come," said Will.

The door closed with a soft clicking sound. It echoed about the small hospital room, and a nice change of pace from the gossiping nurses in the hallway and groans of patients in adjacent rooms, but it was followed by an awkward silence, one disturbed only by the beeps of machines. A series of slow footsteps followed, as Hannibal walked to the foot of the mattress. He placed a small bag on the hospital table that was perhaps half-a-foot above Will's feet.

A small bowl was placed on the polished wood, where the plastic cover was removed. The rich aroma of something oriental drifted through the room, while visible steam danced in the air above the dish, and – without a word – Hannibal placed a series of cutlery down beside the bowl, along with a folded napkin. He removed the bag and proceeded to slide the table along the bed, until it rested over Will's lap and the aroma strengthened. The button beside Will's hand was taken and pressed, so that the bed raised and Will sat upright in a position conducive to a meal.

"I made you some silkie chicken in a broth," said Hannibal.

"I once called it 'chicken soup'," muttered Will. "What's that saying? 'If looks could kill'."

"There is poetry to food, Will. It is taken for granted that a simple flower can express a great deal of emotion, with each bouquet speaking its own unique language, but food often carries the same connotations and implications . . . one merely needs to know how to listen."

"So what's this dish saying, Hannibal?"

Hannibal paused. He stopped with one hand midway to the napkin, while a low hiss of breath escaped from flared nostrils, and – finally – he took the napkin and spread it over Will's lap, before he walked around to a chair designated for visitors. It was lifted just enough that it would not scrape the floor when moved, before positioned at some distance opposite Will. The space was greater than previous conversations, but they remained directly facing one another, and Hannibal took position with crossed legs and clasped hands, as he said:

"I call it 'forgiveness'."

Will pressed his trembling lips into a fine line. He strove for a smile, as he locked eyes with Hannibal despite the shimmer of tears that distorted his vision, and opened his mouth to whisper a 'thank you' that died before it was born. The visible move to his Adam's apple betrayed the swallow of bile and saliva, as he fought for breath. A flush broke over his

cheeks. Will tried to speak again, but the tears exploded and the breaths grew irregular. He hunched forward and sobbed over the steam of his dish, while Hannibal turned away from the emotional display.

“They say forgiveness takes two people,” choked Will. “I don’t know how you can forgive me, not when I’ll never be able to forgive myself . . . I – I did that to you? I don’t even remember . . . well, I don’t remember it like you said . . . I *hurt* you, Hannibal. I betrayed you. I went into law enforcement to protect people, but I guess I ended up becoming the monster I hunted . . .”

“You are no monster, Will.”

“No? You opened your home to me! You took me in when no one else would, and you supported me as a friend even when I wasn’t a good friend back . . . we acted as Abigail’s co-guardians, we worked together as colleagues, and we were so good together too. I ruined that. You always said that people were more than just hormones and instincts, but here I am as proof that some of us are just . . . I don’t know . . . *broken*. I wasn’t strong enough to hold back. I was weak.”

He lifted shaking hands to his face. The tears were hot and wet against his palms, while he pressed the skin so hard against his eyes that sparks of colour appeared behind the black curtain, and the machine beside him grew quicker and quicker in its beeps and buzzes. He peeked out between his fingers, as mucus and tears streamed over his cheeks in an inelegant manner, and his gaze fell upon Hannibal, who remained impassive and distant. Will dropped his hands onto his lap, where fingers toyed with the napkin and blankets, and rushed out in a hushed breath:

“How are you over it so easily?”

Hannibal bristled. He straightened in his chair, before his head slowly turned. It moved as if guided by an invisible hand, while those eyes looked so much darker under the low lights of the room, and his lips pursed with a subtle movement, as his nostrils widened for a deep breath. Will lowered his gaze. He took up a spoon for distraction, but dropped it with a clatter onto the wooden tabletop. Will cursed. The tears pricked again, as he struggled and fought to take it into his hand, before – with a choked cry – he swept his hand across the side of the table.

The spoon and knife were thrown onto the floor, as he collapsed back onto the bed. He wept with heaves of his chest, while he covered his face once more, before – with a staggered sigh – dropped his hands and mumbled a weak apology. Hannibal stood. He walked around the bed and bent low to take the cutlery, and returned to the side of the bed, where he wiped them down with hospital wipes and placed the spoon in Will’s hand. Will allowed his fist to be closed around the spoon, before it was guided to the bowl and heaped up a large spoonful. Hannibal said:

“I am not ‘over it’, Will.”

“You said that you forgive me, though.”

“I forgive you on a cognitive level.” Hannibal sighed. “If I did not, I would not have visited you every day for the past week. It is clear that this was indeed a hormone imbalance, and we could not have known how extreme it would present. In a sense, this may have been a blessing, for – were it not for your seizure – we would not have the recent blood results to confirm what I had suspected all this time. You were not in your right mind, and they suspect that you may have an infection of sorts, too. That would not help matters.”

“Are you deflecting? I ask about forgiveness, you talk about medicine.”

“Did you consider one is easier to talk about than the other? I will admit to a stoic persona, but I am still a man at heart and betrayal is a blade that cuts deep . . . if you were the one to experience a non-consensual union, you would have a great deal of emotion to process, would you not? Is it unreasonable for a person in my position to wish to avoid a traumatic topic?”

“I wish I could process trauma anywhere near as good as you . . .”

“Will, I may forgive you cognitively, but emotionally I will require time.” Hannibal turned away his gaze. “I will ask you for distance, just for a while, and allow me time to rebuild the trust that has been broken, so that one day we can perhaps regain what was lost. Do not mistake my calmness for apathy; it is no exaggeration to say I would kill for you, Will, and as such I do not take my need for space lightly . . . it is taking all of my energies to stand here beside you.”

Will kept his spoonful of soup over the bowl. He sniffed and blinked away tears, before bringing the warm liquid to his mouth, and – as soup spilled over the sides with the tremble of his fingers – quickly gulped down the liquid . . . it reminded him of his hunger. Will ate the contents with some speed, while Hannibal returned to his seat and sat down with some elegance. He looked impeccable with a new pinstripe suit, complete with a complementary tie, and his hair was swept back with gel into a handsome style. Will forced out in a rushed voice:

“I wouldn’t blame you if you never wanted to see me again.”

“No, but I would blame myself for turning away in your hour of need.” Hannibal winced. “I know that you were not in your right mind, Will. If you were not in the throes of a hormone imbalance and infection, you would have likely enticed me to take you or refrained from intercourse in the first place. It would be unfair to hold against you actions beyond your control.”

“I – I just . . . I’ve *never* had a rut like that. I just don’t understand how -!”

Will screwed shut his eyes. The image of Hannibal before him was so unlike in his memory . . . no, his hallucination . . . *a bare and naked chest with a smattering of hair, with head thrown back and throat exposed, and fingers clawing down his chest in pleasure* . . . Will opened his eyes again and ran them over Hannibal. The machine beeped faster. He clenched his hands tight, until crescent-shaped marks appeared on his palms. The spoon dropped into the soup. A small splash sent droplets of liquid onto the table, as Will asked in a voice that bordered on a shout:

“Why don’t you hate me?”

“Would you hate me if our roles were reversed?”

“They aren’t reversed, though, are they?” Will swallowed hard. “You didn’t rape *me*, did you? I mean, if you had . . . I think I would be afraid of you. I don’t think I could be with you or around you either, not unless there was some compelling reason to keep me there, and I’m not sure I’m strong enough to come through that . . . I’m too weak for that level of trauma.”

“You’re stronger than you realise, Will. You will see that in time.”

“I – I *raped* you, Hannibal! Why – *how* – are you so calm about that? I feel . . . I feel dirty, like no matter how hard I scrub or claw at my skin that nothing makes it clean, especially when my memories are so fucked! It’s like it’s not just my body, but my mind . . . I don’t know who I am any more. I never thought myself capable of this level of evil, but I – I guess I am . . . if I’m not who I thought I was, how can I redeem myself? It’s like my foundations have been taken away.

“I keep waking up and I just . . . it still feels like a dream. You can say that it wasn’t me who did that, but the fact is that it *was* me . . . if I were drunk, if I were high, you wouldn’t have excused it, right? I mean, people even say that a loss of inhibitions allows you to see someone’s true self, so what does it mean that I had this thing inside me all this time? I don’t . . . I can’t . . .”

“What is done is done, Will. You cannot undo the past.”

“That just makes it ten times worse!” Will laughed through tears. “I used to like it on my own, you know? I retired from the force and just spent my time giving odd guest lectures and fixing boat motors in my garage . . . I never hurt anyone, I never bothered anyone . . . maybe that’s what I need. I should get away . . . get away from all this . . . from you . . .”

“You may have not hurt anyone, but being alone hurt yourself.”

“Did it? I’d take loneliness over self-loathing any day . . .”

Will pushed the tray further down. He swung his legs around; they dropped onto the cold and bare floor, which brought a harsh hiss of breath from his lips, and – as he clenched the edge of the mattress – he slowly lifted his foot upward, where he saw the cuts and bruises that lingered on his soles. The hospital gown hung from his frame. It was far from flattering, especially when combined with his unkempt beard and tangled hair, and he remained half-perched on the edge of the bed, while his stomach growled and the fever broke again over his flesh.

“I should tell Jack what I did,” said Will.

He ran the back of his hand over his forehead. The sweat was thick and coated his skin, and it lingered with a sickening sensation, enough that he wiped his hand on the sheets. The fever was under his skin . . . somewhere between flesh and muscle . . . it burned like fire, searing the ends of his nerves with a stinging ache. He scratched at his arms, while his eyes darted

about the room and his head jerked awkwardly back and forth. A neatly folded pile of his clothes sat at the far corner of the room, beside a selection of flowers and fresh grapes. Hannibal mumbled:

“What good will telling Jack do, Will?”

“Maybe – Maybe he can get me into some therapy or –”

“You are already in therapy.”

“Then he can get me medication or a sponsor or *something*!” Will hissed. “I – I’m a danger to you . . . I’m a danger to others . . . hell, I’m even a danger to *myself*. It’s why I was staying at yours in the first place! I just . . . I don’t know how I’m going to get through this, but worse than that is that *you’re* the victim, so I shouldn’t even be feeling this way . . . I feel this guilt and shame, like I’m taking your pain and attention from you, and I -?”

“Finish the thought, Will,” said Hannibal.

“No . . . I’m done with thinking . . . done with feeling . . .”

He stood shakily on his feet. Will pulled off the various monitors and took a hold of his drip, as slowly – with unsteady and uneven steps – he made his way over to the table. A nurse quickly ran inside, as the beeping grew into a constant and high-pitched sound, but Hannibal gestured to Will and turned off the machine. They exchanged various words on ‘stats’, ‘obs’, and other such medical terms, before she nodded and walked back to her station. Will grunted, before he pulled on the underpants and trousers underneath his hospital gown. They fit. They were from home.

“I plan to stay with Alana for a while,” said Hannibal.

Will froze. He stopped with a sock half-pulled onto his foot. He took in a deep breath, as his heart raced within his chest, and moved his gaze to Hannibal, who sat back in the chair and kept his back to Will, as if still talking to him upon the mattress. Will resumed with his socks and shoes, while striving to hide the tremble to his fingers. The silence resumed. It was cold and emphasised all the small sounds around them, until they reached a cacophony that had him pushing his hands against his ears to muffle the chaos, and Will shook his head.

“It’s your house,” choked Will. “I should be the one to leave.”

“Nonsense.” Hannibal sighed. “I believe I said that I hope we can reconcile, and – when that time comes – it shall be easier for me to return to my home, than it shall for you to return to the home of a man whose presence makes you feel ashamed.”

“I – I’m not safe to be around Abigail and –”

“Abigail needs stability. It will be better for her to believe I am living out my heat with an alpha I trust, than it will be for someone whose rut has finished to leave with little reason, as what reason should we provide? I would not even tell Alana about this, let alone one who is

like a daughter to me . . . to *us*. I would also say again that it is best to not speak of this to Jack."

"Why? I need – I need to talk to someone about this . . . someone that –"

"Then talk to me," said Hannibal. "Just do not forget that this is *my* trauma, Will."

Will furrowed his brow. He bit into the inside of his cheek, until he tasted the thick metallic liquid over his tongue, and he remained silent even as Hannibal came to stand beside him. A warm touch came to remove the IV from the crook of his arm, along with the canulla. Will mumbled a 'thanks', before pulling off the hospital gown . . . Hannibal watched. It brought a frown to Will, as he sat bare-chested before one who had endured such a violent attack, but soon he looked down and saw the finger-marks that raked down his chest. He swayed in his seat.

He quickly wrenched on an undershirt, as he hid the evidence of the crime. Hannibal left the bag beside the bed, along with the meal upon the tray, and simply moved towards the door without so much as a glance towards Will, but – as his hand pulled the door half-open – he paused. He finally turned towards Will and half-smiled, with tears giving him an eerie sense of vulnerability that was disconcerting on a man with such immense self-control. Will choked out:

"When will you be back?"

"It is difficult to say," said Hannibal. "I will discuss it with Bedelia, but I believe that a few days will be all that is necessary to process the emotions . . . in an ideal world, I would be back before you are even discharged from hospital, but I am a man of practicalities."

"Hannibal, I'm really, *really* sorry that –"

'Hey, Will! Are you up for visitors?'

The door swung open, nearly knocking Hannibal back a few steps. Abigail practically ran into the room, with hands struggling to contain large bags of clothes and toiletries and gifts, and the smile on her lips was bright and added colour to her cheeks. The bags were dropped under the table, as Will finished dressing and thanked her for her help. A nurse walked by and chided that he required another night of observation and further tests, while someone giggled in the distance at some inane gossip. Hannibal nodded to Will and said in a quiet voice:

"I will speak to you another time, Will."

Hannibal left without a glance back. He closed the door behind him, while Abigail snatched at a bunch of grapes and threw herself onto the mattress, and – with a bounce – talked at great length about how comfortable she found the pillows and how cool she found the buttons. Will smiled, even as he wiped the tears from his cheeks. He fumbled with the contents of the tabletop, as he subtly sought for his gun and badge, before finding the holster hidden among the bag of clothes beneath the table. He dropped his shoulders and sighed. Abigail failed to notice, as she asked:

“Is he okay?”

“I – I might have offended him last night,” muttered Will. “It’s – It’s nothing you need to worry about, but I think we just need some time apart . . . me to recover, him to forgive me . . . w-we’ll be back to normal before you know it, Abigail. You did right calling Beverly, though; if it weren’t for you, I might still be wandering around the roads alone. Thank you.”

“Well, I already lost one dad,” teased Abigail. “I can’t afford to lose another.”

“You’re not going to lose me, Abigail.” Will smiled. “I’ll tell you what, why don’t we talk about something a bit more light-hearted? Why don’t you tell me about your violin lessons? You must be pretty glad to be staying with Hannibal now . . . less time to travel, right?”

“I guess,” mumbled Abigail. “To be honest, I was kind of thinking of quitting? I mean, it’s no big deal or anything, but there’s just something about Tobias . . . it gives me the creeps, you know? It’s some of the things he says . . . like, he’ll joke about how he tore some guy’s head off for insulting him, but then *literally* some guy will turn up in the news without a head.”

“You’ll blame him for the bad timing of the Ripper?”

“No, but he has this friend . . . Franklyn Something? He said the same thing to me, like he’s worried something darker is going on with the guy, and he’s weirdly obsessed with making his own instruments or strings or whatever. I mean, I know what it’s like to be passionate about your interests, and it’s not like you or me are normal either, but he just has this dark edge to him.”

“Has he ever done anything to make you uncomfortable? Hurt you?”

“What? No. No! Nothing like that,” said Abigail.

Will stood and went over to the mirror. It stood on a far wall, just beside the *en suite*, and – despite his regular outfit – his sickness was clear . . . sunken cheeks, pale skin, bloodshot eyes . . . he took in a deep breath and ran his hands over his face, before he forced a smile. He placed a hand on his gun, before he pulled on a jacket and made an off-hand comment about being cold. Abigail jumped out of bed. He laughed as she guided him back and chided him for having gotten out in the first place, and he hugged her briefly, before asking in a warm voice:

“Hey, can you get me some water?”

“Huh? Oh, sure,” said Abigail.

He eyed the door, as Abigail moved over to the table . . . *‘- takes the intestines as a trophy’* . . . *‘I make all my own strings, using only the finest cat gut’* . . . his heart raced a little faster, while the cuts down his stomach ached. The memories mingled with the hallucinations of the stag-man. The pain of his trauma mingled with that of Hannibal. It made his breath run quicker, as his mouth ran dry, and his anger blurred the vision around his edges, until he could only see ahead . . . only see in a tunnel vision . . . *‘competition between the killers’* . . .

Will stared down at his hands . . . hands that hurt, hands that harmed . . . a broken laughed caught at the back of his throat, as he thought to how often time was lost and how often he saw what was unseen to others . . . *'contacts to law enforcement'*. He held back a scream. Abigail stood at the table, pouring water from a glass dispenser into a plastic cup, and it took all his strength – all his self-control – to speak in a normal voice as opposed to the clawing inhuman groan.

"Oh, no, bottled water," said Will. "They should have some in the gift shop."

"You're pretty picky for a patient, aren't you?"

"Hey, aren't you meant to be nice to me?"

"Well, I suppose you *are* still sick. I'll go get your water."

Abigail strode over to the bed. A kiss was placed to his forehead, before she walked back out and waved to him with a lazy hand, and – as she closed the door behind her – he jumped out of bed and patted down his outfit . . . *keys, wallet, gun* . . . Will raced to the door. He put his hand on the handle and pushed down . . . he waited . . . *'I'm a danger to you, I'm a danger to others'* . . . Will screwed shut his eyes and clenched his teeth. The fever caused clothes to cling to skin. The recent weeks mingled and merged . . . *the Jigsaw Killer* . . . *the Chesapeake Ripper* . . . *himself* . . .

"Sorry, Abigail. I have a date with the Ripper."

A tear ran down his cheek. He threw open the door. The lingering question lay at the back of his mind, barely repressed: *if he could do that to Hannibal, what else could he have done?* There was only one certainty . . . one absolute . . . Tobias Budge was the Chesapeake Ripper. A strange laugh fell from his throat . . . as if it belonged to someone else . . . Will threw a hand over his mouth, as he darted through the corridors and dodged the nurses. The two were in contact . . . connected . . . the Killer and the Ripper . . . Will had to go . . . had to find him . . .

The Ripper waited . . .

Chapter 11

It was empty.

The shop was eerily quiet, save for the echo of the door-bell. It rang out with a gentle tinkle, enough to penetrate every inch of the shop-floor and beyond, and Will froze in front of the door with his gun raised. He waited for the sound to disappear. It was difficult to control every breath that left in what felt like a loud uproar, while his heart beat loud like a metronome in his ears, and his eyes – darting back and forth – found only darkness and shadows.

He stepped forward. The floorboards creaked underfoot. There was no element of surprise, just as there was no way to remain unnoticed . . . there were only creaks and pants and the rustling of clothes as he moved, as if every step announced his presence. Will strode towards the counter. He turned and darted as taught, now instinct out of years of experience. A stream of light fell on the countertop display, where it illuminated the row of strings ready for purchase, and – with a steady hand – he reached for the nearest set. He slid them into his pocket.

A sound echoed out from behind.

Will spun around with gun pointed towards the source. A shadowy figure appeared in the doorway of the basement, where it wore a smile so bright that its teeth stood out in the darkness, and their hands were held out at the sides, as if goading him to come forward. Will stepped back. He aimed his gun for the chest, where the target was larger, and took a step backwards, as he pressed himself against a wall and took in possible exits in his peripheral vision. A low chuckle erupted from Tobias, almost primal and animalistic. He lowered his head.

“My,” said Tobias. “Do you plan on shooting me?”

The shadows grew about his face. It turned Tobias into something monstrous . . . something inhuman . . . *not quite the stag, but still far from a man* . . . Will took in a deep breath, as he focused his gaze and assumed the correct stance. He counted the beats of his heart. Tobias remained stationary, poised between the basement and shop-floor. He lingered between two worlds, standing like a silhouette that blacked out the light behind him, and his smile seemed to grow until it was all that could be seen . . . all that was real . . . Will’s hand trembled . . .

“I – I know what you are,” choked Will.

Tobias raised his hands in a gesture of mock surrender. He stepped into the light. It struck him harsh, enough to illuminate his features, and he seemed almost human, save for his eyes . . . they were dark, lacking emotion . . . *cold*. Will held tighter onto his weapon. The pattern of the metal dug into his skin, while the edges cut deep into his muscle, and a sharp ache spread through the bones of his wrist, as a slight sway to his hands distorted his aim. A sweat broke over his skin, enough that a bead slowly rolled down his temple into his beard. Tobias said in a calm voice:

“I don’t believe you do, Mr Graham.”

“The Chesapeake Ripper is a male, early twenties to forties, and an alpha.” Will swallowed. “He has a great deal of education, as well as monetary resources and a huge amount of time on his hands, and he’s likely single with his own property . . . a lot of overlap with the Jigsaw Killer, but working independently of him. The Jigsaw Killer is making his kills in response to those of the Chesapeake Ripper, hoping to steal the limelight and communicate with him . . .

“I might not know what you’re saying to each other, but I know what you’re saying about the people you kill . . . they’re useless, they’re vermin . . . in fact, the only worth they have is in death, and you make sure of that by taking their intestines . . . by turning them into works of art that no one will ever forget. Tell me, what will we find if we analyse these strings?”

“I don’t know. What will you find?”

“You – You’re *cutting* out the intestines to use as strings! I know what Franklyn said, just like I know what you said to Abigail . . . where’s the basement? Is that where you’re doing it? You probably see it as a job . . . a public service . . . something better done in the office than at home, am I right? Well, we’ll see . . . we’ll see after I call for back-up. We’ll see it all . . .”

“You won’t turn me in, Mr Graham.”

“I won’t? Why won’t I?”

Tobias stepped forward. Will gasped. He lifted his gun again . . . *it had been lowered* . . . *when had it been lowered?* . . . he screwed shut his eyes, before – with a skip of his heart – he flung them wide open and stumbled along the wall, desperate for distance. Tobias was now centre of the room. He loomed tall with an imposing figure. Will fell backwards onto his buttocks, as he scrambled towards the main door, and pulled himself to a standing position. He ran his hand over his face, wiping away the heavy sweat from his brow, as Tobias laughed out:

“Because *you* are the Jigsaw Killer, of course.”

Will dropped his hand. The gun smacked hard against his side, as his mouth fell open and a series of incoherent words tumbled from his lips in rapid succession . . . the door handle dug into his back, while the bell rattled at its hinge . . . Will retched. The bile burned at the back of his throat, while he fumbled with his free hand . . . it scratched and clawed at the door, searching for the handle that should have been in easy reach . . . tears pricked at his eyes, as he choked and coughed and spluttered. Tobias kept his distance. Will tasted iron on his tongue.

“No,” said Will. “I – I’d know . . .”

“Would you know?” Tobias shook his head. “I remember when you first came in with Abigail; you shook from head to toe with a glazed over expression, before just . . . walking away. I had to take the poor girl home in my car. Where did you go, Mr Graham? Do you remember? Abigail says you’ve been losing time lately . . . losing memories, losing touch . . . what a shame, yes?”

“I – I wouldn’t . . . I’m . . . I’m *not* a killer!”

“The victims are all in law enforcement. You have knowledge of all the locations, as well as their routines and habits and activities . . . you know the guards’ routes, you know which cameras are out of order . . . I *bet* you’re even down as an investigator. Oh, that must be so useful! You get to know all the leads in advance, before steering the team away . . .

“They say you’re trying to talk to me, hmm? Well, here I am! Do you know that Abigail is afraid to go home? Do you know she talks about how much you scare her? I bet it must frighten you . . . it must frighten you to feel the blood on your hands and not know where it’s from, while you wash it from your flesh and pray that no one ever finds out your dirty secret, not even yourself. I wonder if you noticed the patterns; after all, when did the killings start, Will?”

“I – I don’t . . . I don’t know . . .”

“Was it before or *after* you developed this ‘hormone imbalance’?”

“I don’t know!” Will screamed. “*I don’t know*!”

Will buried a hand into his hair. The tears were hot and cold at once, scorching at his eyes and distorting the world around him . . . *no, the killer was familiar, but not known . . . someone like him, but not him* . . . the tremble to his lip made speech impossible. Tobias slowly came towards him, and – with a gentle touch – took the gun from his hands. It was slid back into its holster on his hip . . . *no* . . . *not me, not this* . . . Will spun around. He finally found the handle, but – as he pulled it hard – a harsh hand slammed down on the wood. It kept shut the door.

“Will,” said Tobias. “What else don’t you know?”

Tobias leaned close. It was enough that Will turned away . . . turned his head . . . desperate to get away from the breath, the warmth . . . those eyes were curious, detached, and not at all with the soft intimacy that came with the gazes of Hannibal. Will sobbed, as his hand pulled and shook at the handle. He refused to meet Tobias’ gaze. A soft chuckle fell from Tobias, who finally let go of the door . . . *broken, weak, defeated* . . . Will slid down the wood, where he dropped unceremoniously to the floor. Tobias continued to step backwards. He continued to laugh.

“Oh, I *see*,” said Tobias. “You hurt someone, didn’t you?”

“I – I didn’t – I didn’t mean to –”

“Who was it, Will? Was it a relative? A friend? Abigail?” Tobias smirked. “No, not Abigail. If it were her, I imagine she would have called the police and be back in hospital . . . no, if you’re walking the streets then it must be someone that doesn’t want harm to befall you. That means loyalty, doesn’t it? Hmm. Who would be so loyal to you to hide a great harm? Ah, but to be able to hide that level of harm means an emotional betrayal . . . it couldn’t be physical, unless –

“Oh my. Is that it? You with your hormone imbalance, struggling underneath the weight of that swirling maelstrom of emotion inside, and there – before you – was someone that trusted you so unconditionally that they would be around you, even in your rut . . . who was it, Will? Was it Hannibal? Did you rape him? Is he forever tainted by your hands and your touch?”

“I didn’t know . . . I *swear* I didn’t know . . .”

“If you could do that, what else could you do? Is it really such a leap from rapist to killer? It’s no wonder that Abigail quit her lessons; it’s one thing to be around a man that makes you uncomfortable, but another to be bombarded with it at home as well as at extra-curricular activities, until there’s no escape . . . no end, no out . . . what did you do, Will? What will you do to her? How will her blood feel on your hands? You taking in won’t make things safer for her.”

Will crawled around. He slipped on his knees, even as he reached up for the handle. There was wetness on his hands . . . *blood, tears . . . it was black when he looked* . . . ever wall seeped with that thick black liquid, until it was cold about his knees. He choked. He coughed. Will clawed at the handle . . . *the one obstacle to escape* . . . while the walls closed around him, growing closer and closer until they stole away his breath and obliterated all light. The tears were hot against his cheeks, searing his skin with long streaks Will finally found purchase on the handle.

“You should run, Will,” said Tobias. “It’ll give me time to flee, and maybe somewhere . . . at some time . . . we can meet again under better circumstances. You don’t want them to catch you, do you? You don’t want to hurt them, do you? I smell it on you, Will. I smell the infection festering in your skull, and that with the hormone imbalance -?”

Tobias gave a low whistle.

“You raped Hannibal. You scared Abigail. The reason you aren’t any closer to catching the Jigsaw Killer is clear . . . *it’s you.* You are the only one who can stop him, Will. You should run. There’s still time . . . still time to save yourself, and save them in the process. Run, Will.”

Will screamed. It was a primal and broken sound, wrenched from his aching throat, and it eradicated all other sounds . . . *no bell from the door, no ticking of the clock* . . . there was only a burst of cold air, as the door swung wide and exposed a world beyond. It was bright. He covered his eyes with his arm. The room was filling with liquid behind him, until it soaked into his clothes and crept higher with an intimate touch, and – rather than be swallowed whole – he scrambled to his feet and burst forward. He dove into the light.

The light blinded him, as his eyes struggled to adjust. The room slowly came into view. It was cold with artificial light and filled with various boards, files, and projectors. A table sat just before him in an office . . . *the black waters were gone, the sound of soft music drifted through from an old stereo plugged into a wall* . . . Will fought back the urge to smash it into pieces. He drew in deep breaths, as his eyes ran along familiar décor and strange designs. He choked out:

“Where – Where am I?”

He spun around. There was no Tobias. There was only the familiar glass walls that came with many of the offices within the bureau, and the photographs stuck inelegantly in a messy collage on the door in an attempt at personalisation. He gulped down breaths. He ran a hand through his hair, before turning back to see Beverly behind her desk, and – furrowing his brow – Will looked her over with a slow and cautious gaze. She was real. *This* was real.

The tears were dried on his cheeks, but there was something else . . . mud and dirt that caked him from head to toe, until his boots were brown and no other shade, and his sleeves crinkled with an awkward sound, as the mud broke an crackled with each bend of his arm. He raised his hands before him. They trembled, but there was no blood . . . no visceral . . . Will tumbled back. He dropped against the door, which no longer opened out onto the music shop, and stared hard at Beverly, as she slowly came towards him with hands raised, like confronting a wild animal.

"Will," said Beverly. "Are you okay?"

"I – I was just – I was just with Tobias. I didn't –. How did –?"

He buried his face into his hands. The taste of iron on his lips betrayed a bitten tongue and bitten cheek, as well as a throat raw from screams and cries, and – in place of broken sobs – a strange and inhuman laugh spilled from his mouth, where it made Beverly pale. He parted his fingers just enough to see her fear . . . her concern . . . before he licked at his lips, which contorted on every aborted word and distorted every sound. He reached out towards her. She stepped back. A wail emitted from his lips, until it threatened to become a scream, and he clamped a hand over his mouth to block out the sound, as he found strength to speak and cried out:

"It's me, Beverly. It's me . . ."

Chapter 12

Beverly fell silent.

The door was framed by two floor-to-ceiling panes of glass. It allowed a clear view of the office opposite, along with the few technicians that darted along the hallway with heads low, and – equally – it allowed those same people to slow their pace and steal a glance inside. He leaned against the door, so that only the vague shape of a person could be seen with the most focused of stares and precise angles. He gasped down heavy breaths. He slid downward.

Will pressed a hand to his heart, where every beat pounded against his palm. He clawed at his chest, as if he could reach inside and hold it tight, and soon began to pound against it . . . *striking, punching, slapping* . . . every beat echoed in his ears, every beat sent out a cold wave. Will sobbed. He moaned. He stopped only when Beverly took a hold of his wrists. The warmth penetrated through his skin, enough for his breath to hitch and eyes to adjust, and – slowly – his head raised to see her looking down at him with a pale face. Beverly whispered:

"Will, I need you to calm down."

Beverly crouched. He threw a hand onto hers, even as it held him with a light touch. The grip on her was tight, enough that she hissed, and – with wide eyes – he pulled away and muttered out *'I'm sorry'* like a mantra, until the words lost all sense and meaning. Beverly said nothing; she merely came to his side and sat beside him, where he leaned against the door in turn, and threw an arm over him, while he wept and coughed and spluttered out incoherent sounds. It was perhaps ten or twenty minutes before the sobs subsided, and she could ask:

"Look, what is it you think you did?"

"I – I was investigating a lead . . ."

"A lead? What lead?"

Will ran his hands over his face. He wiped at his nose and cheeks with an unsteady hand, until a crumpled tissue – that he prayed was unused – was pushed into his fingers, and he removed the last of the tears and mucus and mud from his flesh. There was a speck of blood on his thumb. He moved is fingers to his nose, followed by turning over his hands, and ended with a brief pat down of his body . . . there was no discernable source. He made to wipe the blood away, as he sought to see the depth of the cut, but there was no blood. Will laughed through fresh tears.

"I went to look into Tobias Budge," muttered Will.

"What? Abigail's music teacher?"

"He fits the profile, Beverly." Will sighed. "I know he's the Chesapeake Ripper. *I know*! I wish I could say that I pieced it together little by little, but it was like . . . like this huge jump . . . a leap of faith, maybe? I was getting ready to leave hospital, when Abigail said something

about him, and then I remembered seeing the cat-gut on my previous visit . . . it just fell into place . . .

"It was like doing a jigsaw with the pieces upside-down, and – only when it's complete – flipping it over to see that face looking back at me . . . he confessed, Beverly. I mean, unless I hallucinated that, too . . . he confessed, and he told me - . . . he told me - . . ."

A strange cry escaped his throat. It blended into the laugh – the broken and choked laugh almost like a death-rattle – before it echoed out about the office, where it bounced off the walls and came back to him like an eerie doppelganger. He fumbled with a trembling hand about the breast pocket of his jacket . . . *a different outfit, a change of clothes* . . . a wince broke across his features, as he snatched out a set of instrument strings tied together in a neat bow. The small package was practically thrown at Beverly, who barely found time to take them in hand. He wrapped his hands around his legs, as she turned the strings over and teased:

"I'd joke that I didn't get you anything, but –"

"Promise me – *promise me* – you'll analyse the strings, Beverly," choked Will. "We questioned why the Chesapeake Ripper was taking the intestines of his victims . . . *it's to make strings*. I took these from the display case of his store, but you'll probably find more in his basement, and if you search through his old records . . . if you look into people who brought strings for their instruments . . . you'll probably find more. They're his trophies. They're a musical record."

"I – I'll let Jack know." Beverly winced. "The Chesapeake Killer kills in batches of threes, Will, but lately he's been timing his kills with the Jigsaw Killer in some sort of sick competition . . . we've got another 'person' left by the Jigsaw Killer. I've not seen the scene yet, but unless Budge has cottoned on and gone on the run -? He might be preparing for his next kill."

"I don't know . . . I passed out after I confronted him. I woke up here."

"Okay, well, we'll send officers to the store. I'm willing to bet that he won't be there, but we can collect evidence, go through his records, check his diary . . . chances are we can narrow down where he might go and what he might do next. We can't rule out that he'll kill again. If he does, it could be something pretty big . . . one last bang before he goes down and all that. If that's the case . . . with our missing person case and all . . . we need to be on this sooner than later."

Beverly slid the strings into her pocket, before pulling out her phone. The manicured fingers moved with a fast and inconsistent rhythm over the screen, with a clicking that brought small flinches to Will on every tap of a 'key', and his head lolled lifelessly towards the sound. He focused his gaze and looked to the screen: *'Tobias Budge CR suspect – Will okay, with me'*. He rolled his head back, while vague words moved through his mind, clinging and cloying to one another until the previous sentence finally processed itself and became known to him.

He pulled himself upright. He swayed a little, enough that Beverly jumped and placed a hand on his back, and slowly he was guided towards the leather armchair opposite her desk, where

he collapsed with a heavy thud and soft sigh. Beverly took the edge of the desk; she crossed her legs at the ankles and kept her head low, while Will bit into his lip and contorted his face. The beating of his heart increased again. He took in slow yet shallow breaths and whispered:

“What missing person?”

Beverly cursed beneath her breath. It was almost lost to the soft music and footsteps outside, but the way she buried her head into her hands could not be missed. Will leaned forward. He pressed his forearms against his knees, as he hunched his back toward the desk, and stared up at her with wide eyes and lips pressed into a tight line. Beverly dropped her hands. A paleness swept over her usually dark skin, while her eyes refused to meet his even for a second.

“Abigail has been reported missing,” said Beverly.

Will jolted upright. The chair nearly fell behind him, as he marched into the centre of the office, and – with a hand over his mouth, and one over his hip – paced back and forth over the old rug that remained as a holdover from the previous occupant. A cold sweat broke over his skin, sticking the fabric of his clothes to his flesh. It peeled away each time he moved. A series of breathless sounds fell from him, as the laughter died with the lack of air in his lungs, and he stopped only to deliver a grimacing smile. The corner of his lips twitched.

“It wasn’t the Ripper that took her,” choked Will.

“How can you say that?”

“If Abigail’s missing, it’s the Jigsaw Killer.”

He tented his hands before his mouth. It did little to control his breathing, as he took in slow and deep breaths and swallowed hard. The tears mingled with the sweat, stinging his eyes even as he half-closed them, and slowly turned his head towards the board at the far side of the office, where a photograph of Abigail sat on the top-right corner. A series of red strings led from it onto various parts of a map. He reached towards her face. The distance of the room forbade contact, but the very act of something made him feel better than doing nothing. He said breathlessly:

“The Chesapeake Ripper is almost random in his killings, but he’s not so indiscriminate as to kill someone close to him without provocation or reason. He also requires a great deal of time to set up his kills and make his displays, which – at the moment – he’s lacking . . . if he doesn’t leave soon, or has already gone, there’s every chance he’ll get caught. He’s a practical man.

“There also isn’t much time between the victims’ disappearances and the discovery of the bodies, with some appearing the same day or barely advanced in decomposition. I – I don’t know how much time I lost, but I doubt it was enough for Tobias to take Abigail and stage an elaborate display, and – if he had – she’d be somewhere in the open or in public, so she’d have been found by now. It means that she’s not a victim . . . at least not *his* victim.”

“But what makes you think it’s the Jigsaw Killer?”

“The Jigsaw Killer takes his victims and stores them. He still engages in gratuitous displays, but the first was some considerable time after the disappearance of the final victim, and the ‘person’ he creates relies on other victims, which if he’s taken -? I mean, maybe Abigail is his last of a second batch, but we still have three remaining ‘bodies’ of his current batch to find. It’d be too out of character; it would only make sense if she was the final kill . . . his golden ticket . . .

“It’s why . . . it’s why whomever took her had to have a connection to her . . . it’s why Garrett Jacob Hobbs intended for her to be his last kill, and why he couldn’t live with her gone. It’s too much a coincidence that she’d be taken by him by chance, but she’s too smart a girl to know to leave at a time like this without telling anyone. How – How did she go missing anyway?”

“We don’t know,” said Beverly. “Hannibal reported her missing when she never came home from the hospital, but security footage shows her answering a call, leaving the building, and that’s it . . . we’re not even sure if she’s ‘missing’ as such, but she left her phone in reception.”

He marched towards the board. The photographs and information mostly pertained to the Chesapeake Ripper, with some space dedicated to the Jigsaw Killer, as the FBI would take his case personally due to the law-related victims, and Abigail . . . alone, frozen in time . . . stared at him from the corner. He formed a fist. He lifted it high, before slamming it down, but stopped just an inch from the board. A low chuckle tumbled from his mouth, as he shook his hand at the board and finally turned his back on the maps and photographs and files.

The twitch of his lips brought a spark of panic, as they contorted with a mind of their own, and his eyes stung with a sharp mixture of tears and sweat, while his nostrils flared with an irregular pattern that seemed at odds with his heartbeat. He pressed a hand to his chest. Each breath was shallow and fast, while he hugged an arm around his stomach and held tight. The bile burned at the back of his throat. He turned to face Beverly, who was deathly pale, and whispered:

“It was me.”

Beverly fell silent. The narrowing of her eyes was followed by half-parted lips. A move of her head sent locks of black hair over her shoulder, while she gently pushed herself away from the des, and – slowly – she came to stand before him and took his upper arms in hand. He tensed. A low hiss of breath slid from between his teeth, and he clenched his fists at his sides, while his heart raced with a terrifying speed that only increased the beats in a self-fulfilling curse. Beverly lowered her head and locked eyes with him, while asking in a slow and calm voice:

“What? You telling me that *you’re* the Jigsaw Killer?”

“I’m telling you that *I’m* the Jigsaw Killer.”

Beverly stared hard. Will flinched.

“. . . I think . . .”

Beverly cursed. The hands fell from his arms, before burying themselves in her hair. A smile broke across her lips, but there was no hint of enjoyment, only something akin to anger or confusion, as she stepped back and looked him over slowly from head to toes. He turned his head upward. The harsh artificial lights sent lingering after-images about his retinas, marring his vision and blocking her from sight. Will swayed. He continued to stare, even as Beverly was lost to him, and looked back only when the faint scent of her perfume penetrated his sense.

"It was what Tobias was saying," Will muttered. "It got – It got into my head. I wouldn't have believed it before . . . I don't fit the profile . . . *Abigail* . . . I'm supposed to be her guardian! It was on my watch that she went missing. It was on my watch that she -!"

Will let loose a broken laugh.

"Do you know the last thing I said to her? I asked her whether she knew she was meant to be nice to me, because I was sick . . . a teasing moment of sarcasm is the very last way that she'll remember me and I'll have to live with that forever. The only thing that's worse is if it *wasn't* the last thing I said to her . . . if I don't know what I said while I killed her . . ."

"We don't even know she's dead, Will. It hasn't even been twenty-four hours!"

"Did Hannibal tell you that I raped him?"

The topic changed too quickly for Beverly to register. The painted lips moved to form a word, while a large intake of breath made a slight whooshing sound, but then – with a sudden stillness – realisation dawned and cast a sickly paleness about her complexion. The lips fell shut. Beverly hooked her thumbs into the pockets of her jeans, before she took a step back and ran a hand through her hair, while her eyes refusing to meet his gaze. Will dragged his feet, as he moved aimlessly about the room. He blinked away tears and shook his head.

"No, I guess not," laughed Will.

"Will, you have an infection. It's making you –"

"Delusional? Yeah, I'm aware." Will let out a shuddered sigh. "I – I lost track of time at his house, remember? I saw things . . . did things . . . you took me to Bedelia's house, where he was crying and vulnerable, like I never saw him before, and do you know what he told me? He told me what I did to him. He told me how I raped him. If I can do that, I can do anything."

"What? No! You're not a rapist, Will."

"So Hannibal is a liar, then? I lost consciousness after he told me . . . I woke up in the hospital a week later, and he told me not to tell anyone. How could I argue? It's his trauma, after all. I just . . . I didn't remember it that way, you know? I remember vaguely someone on top of me, someone clawing at me in pleasure . . . I didn't even think I wanted it . . . I can't trust my memory, and I can't trust my perception, so how can I trust it's not me?"

"If – If you *had* raped Hannibal, why didn't he say anything?"

“I – I don’t . . . I don’t think he said why,” muttered Will. “Does it even *matter*? Abigail is out there somewhere . . . alone, scared . . . *dead* . . . I – I need to find her and I need to bring her back, because if I did this -? If I did this to her -? I have to make amends somehow. Even if it wasn’t me that killed her, I may as well have killed her by letting this happen to her . . .”

He threw his hand toward the photograph. Beverly winced to see Abigail staring back at them, but still refused to quite meet his eyes in turn, and soon her back was turned to him, as her hands fumbled about her pockets until they chanced upon her phone. The touch lessened the tension to her muscles. Will let his eyes drop to the screen, which flashed in her pocket, and then moved them quickly to the corridor beyond, where the traffic seemed substantially less than previous, but with the same distinct lack of security and several available exits. He lowered his hands.

“Lounds has written about me non-stop,” said Will. “It’s common knowledge I’m working on the case for Jack, and everyone knows Abigail from what happened with her father . . . if it wasn’t me, it was someone close to me that has a connection to me.”

“Okay, let’s just take this a step at a time, Will . . .”

“You want me to walk you through this?”

“I don’t need you to hold my hand through this,” said Beverly. “Especially when you’re going in circles. You’re more lost than anyone else, Will. Look . . . you’re *not* a serial killer, okay? If someone took Abigail, assuming it’s not the Chesapeake Ripper, then it’s got to be the Jigsaw Killer, and the Chesapeake Ripper – Tobias Budge – is using that to mess with your head. It gets you distracted, gives him time to run. It’s why we need to chase after him like *yesterday*.”

“If someone is trying to frame me, they’re closer to this case than we thought. If someone is trying to get revenge on me, they’re closer to me than we thought.” Will winced. “The worst thought is that he wants to remove any competition for my attention. I likely know them in that case, enough to be close to them . . . it could be Jack, Hannibal . . . *you* . . .”

“So this is all about you? It’s been you all along?”

“Who doesn’t like to feel special?”

“This isn’t funny, Will,” warned Beverly.

A tear rolled down his cheek. It was warm on his skin, leaving a shimmering trail behind. He stepped towards the door, where he stood between its frame and the window, and dropped his forehead onto the cool glass of the window, where his sweat-soaked skin clung to the condensation. He slammed his fist onto the doorframe. The wood rattled under the force, before he slowly slid his hand down and let it fall limp at his side. He pursed and puckered his lips, as he sought to wet them enough to allow words to be formed. A lump formed in his throat.

“You either laugh or cry,” whispered Will.

Beverly slowly came behind him; a hand dropped onto his shoulder, as she squeezed at the hard muscle, and a low sigh almost matched his in volume and desperation. The phone in her pocket was removed, showing a series of messages from Jack in the reflection of the glass, and soon the fingers of her free hand danced over the screen, until her finger poised itself over his name. He laughed until he tasted tears on his tongue, and shrugged her away from his shoulder. Beverly stepped closer towards the door, where her hand dropped onto the handle, and whispered:

"Look, you need to go home and get some rest, Will."

"Jack? Is that you?"

"Will, I mean it," sighed Beverly. "You spent a week in hospital! I'm surprised you could even just walk out like that without atrophy or something . . . you've got something wrong with you, and the only way to fix it is to get a proper check-up, and – *believe me* – you need a check-up, because there's no way that you're a killer or the cause for the killings. You just –"

"I need to find Abigail. I have to stop Tobias. I should –"

"Will, you're talking about having *raped* Hannibal! You're a lot of things . . . anti-social, awkward, obsessive . . . I mean I've got as many complaints about you as I do compliments, but you're not a killer or rapist or abuser. You're just . . . well . . . *you*! I trust you, Will."

Will turned his head. He kept it pressed against the glass, leading to strange shadows about his face, and quirked an eyebrow in her direction, before – with a scoff – rolling back his head and staring hard at the floor. The door handle clicked, as she pulled open the door. A low draught burst through the crack by the windows, sending a burst of movement through his brown hair, and it sent a series of goose-bumps over his arms. Beverly pulled open the door, while lifting the phone midway from pocket to ear and standing with it poised for a conversation.

"Look, I'm going to call Jack," said Beverly. "I was supposed to be there like twenty minutes ago anyway; they've just found body number four of the Jigsaw Killer, and Jack called Hannibal in for a profile . . . it's not like any of us expected you to have escaped a hospital of all places, especially with the fever you had and the symptoms you've experienced."

"Hannibal is there? You – You can't ring Jack. You can't –"

"Dude, think for a minute, okay? If you *had* raped Hannibal, that was like – what – a week ago when it all went down? Why – *Why* – would he be at your bedside every day while you were out, and why would he bring you food, and why . . . for all that is holy . . . would he be back at work like nothing even happened? I don't know what misunderstanding happened, but –"

"It's not a misunderstanding. It's what he told me!"

"And you didn't hallucinate that?"

“Look, you need to find Tobias Budge! And then . . . then you need to bring me in, because I – I’m pretty sure this is all about me . . . if it’s not me doing the killings, then it’s because of me that the killer is doing them! You – You need to consider it . . . examine the evidence . . . Abigail needs that . . . no, Abigail *deserves* that in order to find out where she’s gone!”

“Okay, Will!” Beverly waved wildly and rolled her eyes. “Okay . . . look, just give me a minute, okay? I need to call the hospital and tell them that you’re okay . . . and I –! I’m – I’m saying that word too much. ‘Okay’. ‘Okay’, ‘okay’, ‘okay’ . . . Jesus, now *I* feel like the crazy one! I need to call Jack and Hannibal, too . . . just – just stay here, okay? I’ll be right back. I’ll make sure someone goes after Tobias Budge, and we can talk together about the Jigsaw Killer, but just –”

“You want me to wait . . .”

She paused and said:

“Yes, Will. I want you to wait.”

Beverly stepped out the door. She stepped back. The lingering look delivered to him was difficult to decipher . . . *pity, fear, respect* . . . her mouth opened as if to speak, before she winced and fled through the door. It slammed shut behind her, as she darted along the corridor with the phone now pressed to her ear and hands gesticulating at nothing and no one in particular. He followed her with his eyes, until she took a sharp left and vanished. An unsteady smile overtook his face until he saw it . . . saw her . . . *Abigail* . . . standing alone, just to the right.

The shape of her was indistinct and vague, like viewing a dream in the light of day, and yet – as he stumbled towards the door and threw himself through it – her form remained at the end of the corridor, where it pointed towards the stairwell. A smile was wide and bright. The eyes were alive and vibrant. He watched with open mouth, as she walked away to the stairwell and disappeared in the opposite direction of Beverly. He shouted in a hoarse tone:

“Abigail? Abigail, wait!”

Will stumbled forward. He caught himself at the last second, as he tumbled through the corridor in her direction, and raced with all his strength towards the stairwell, where he cried out her name one more time, as his heart raced with tremendous force. Abigail stood one floor below, where she pressed her finger to her lips and walked out of sight down another flight of stairs. A high-pitched cry broke from him. He ran after her . . . *‘Abigail? Please, Abigail, wait!’* . . .

He reached for her once or twice, with his hand brushing against her sleeve, but never did she once slow or stop . . . a tingle ran through his fingertips . . . there was no force, no pressure, and it was as if she were a phantom, one that might disappear should he get too close, and yet still she led him through the building towards the parking lot. He spotted her by the vehicle. The tears streamed down his cheeks, as he laughed and wiped them away with the back of his hand, and ran towards the car with her name still on his lips. He knew only one thing:

Abigail needed him . . .

Chapter 13

It was cold.

The safe-house was nothing more than a small apartment. A window overlooked a tower-block, where dozens of scattered lights spoke of people still lost within work, and – on every other glance – something new could be seen, like stealing a glance into the lives of others. The sound of cars on the streets broke through the thin panes of glass, with various honks and yells and screeches of tires. It was almost like any other apartment. Beverly winced.

A few officers covered their mouths with makeshift masks . . . *scarves, collars, tissues* . . . others simply dabbed copious amounts of vapour-rub under their noses, while one or two retched in the corridor outside. The depressing part was that she could no longer smell the odour. Beverly walked along the threadbare carpet towards the bedroom, where various markers lay strewn across the floor with numbers, and where a gang of men in white overalls snapped photographs and pointed towards the mattress. The smell was stronger by the threshold.

A body lay on the stained sheets.

The clothes were plain this time, so generic that they almost stood out as notable. A scarf around the neck hid the stitched line that was reminiscent of a Frankenstein monster, and the long sleeves hid the marks about the shoulders that joined arms to torso, while the shirt had been opened by gloved hands to show an incision along the abdomen. The autopsy report would take time once the body was on the slab, but Beverly knew the ‘sweetbreads’ would be absent. A sharp pain ran through her lip, as she bit into it with a sharp canine and winced.

“Ah, Ms Katz,” said Jack. “I was expecting Will to join us.”

Beverly turned. Jack stood just to the side. There was a tremble to his right hand, which was almost hidden by his folded arms and its position under his armpit, but the thumb peaked out and moved enough to betray the depths of emotion. He kept his eye on the body. The head was a familiar one, perhaps someone seen passing in corridors or behind the gloss of a photograph, and Jack stared at it with great intensity, while his cheeks paled and lips whitened. He failed to look in her direction, even as the room cleared out save for one soul, and asked:

“Where’s Will, Beverly?”

A small rustle drew her eyes away from Jack. Hannibal stood unassuming and silent somewhere near the body, where his cool gaze examined the limbs, and he barely paid her a glance in turn, although his expression was a far cry from the one worn by Jack. A smile threatened to pull at his lips, while the small wrinkles to the corner of his eyes deepened, and one hand rested lightly over his stomach, while the other lightly moved some of the markers. Beverly said quietly:

“Will’s . . . gone.”

Hannibal straightened. He opened his mouth to speak, but stopped as Jack practically stormed toward Beverly and towered over her as she turned her head to the side. The colour returned to his cheeks, except the narrowing of his eyes added an edge to his expression, and his nostrils flared with ever hissed breath. Hannibal swept across the room, until he stopped with a hand pressed lightly to Jack's upper arm. The expression was hard to decipher . . . *half-a-smile, a glint to the eyes, a lowering of the head* . . . Beverly stepped back from them.

"We must be calm, Jack," said Hannibal.

"Calm? *Calm?*" Jack shook his head. "Where is Will? He's *supposed* to be in the hospital getting tests! You're the one to message me to say he's in your office and freaking out, but now – oh, *now* – he's nowhere to be found and just – what – 'gone'? You either know where he is or you don't, and if you don't then we need to get men out there looking for him."

"Hey, don't take this out on me," spat Beverly. "How did he manage to get so bad that he could have a fit in the first place? How did he even manage to break out of hospital? I'm not taking the blame for the actions of a grown man, especially when I *looked* for him."

"Evidently, not enough."

"Oh? And where were you looking, Jack?"

Hannibal swiftly stepped between them. It hid Jack from her narrowed gaze, but not before she could see the cold stillness that always precipitated a screaming match, and the small vein on the side of his temple bulged with every hissed breath. Hannibal turned. A slight whiff of expensive cologne broke over the stench of the body, before somehow evaporating once more and leaving behind only decomposition, mould, and rotten food. Beverly brought her hand to her nose, as she moved back to the doorway and lingered between both rooms. Hannibal asked:

"Did Will say anything to you before he left?"

Beverly half-turned. The apartment was mostly a large lounge, with an open kitchenette just to the left of the bedroom, and the bathroom was a basic *en suite* just between them, also in the process of an intense forensic examination. It was enough space for one person. The vast teams of people swelling around its interior made it even smaller, as if the walls has closed in around them, but still the bedroom – despite only containing three whole persons – felt smaller still for the sheer anger that Jack exuded from behind Hannibal. Beverly said with a sigh:

"Will said that Tobias Budge is the Chesapeake Ripper."

"Wait?" Jack interjected. "*What?*"

"I mean, I had the lead looked into in some detail," sighed Beverly. "Budge fits the profile almost perfectly, and the local police force can't find him anywhere. They checked his shop, home, friends . . . it's like he's just dropped off the face of the Earth. I also managed to get a warrant to search the basement of his shop, so I'm just waiting to hear back on the results."

“A warrant? You think he’s hiding something?”

“Do I think he’s hiding something?” Beverly scoffed. “How about Will stole some of the cat-gut string from his music shop before they went missing? I ran checks before coming here; what is meant to be ‘cat’-gut is actually human in origin, and I’m willing to bet it’s one of the Ripper’s victims to boot, especially as they’ve all been found without their intestines. I mean, it’s a long shot, but Will’s long shots always turn out to be right on the bull’s-eye, so –”

“This could be him?”

“This could be him, Jack, yeah . . .”

The tension dropped from Jack. The shoulders visibly dropped, allowing his coat to return to a better fit and more flattering position, and his gloved hands tented over his mouth, as he took in various staggered breaths. He paced behind Hannibal, while their ‘victim’ sat on the mattress. It watched them with cold and glassy eyes, as if the owner of the head had only just been killed, and every instinct called to her to close its eyelids. Every so often, Jack would block the body as he paced in its path, and – as he walked – he forced out the brief question:

“And Will?”

“I’ve called everyone that knows Will,” said Beverly. “Alana Bloom is waiting at his house, and Bedelia Du Maurier is checking at various hospitals and clinics and precincts, just in case someone brought him in or he checked himself in of his own accord. I’ve got my guys running through his cards, along with the GPS on his phone and car, but . . . nothing so far.”

“I should go look for him,” said Hannibal. “If you will excuse me . . .”

“Don’t you have a profile to give for the Jigsaw Killer?”

Beverly raised an eyebrow in his direction. He paused mid-stride towards the doorway, with his hands frozen at the collar of his designer jacket, and – with head low – his eyes locked with hers, until a smile broke across his features. In a second, his entire demeanour changed. He stood straight with chin lifted high, and dropped his hands to his stomach, where he smoothed the creases of his jacket. A low hum fell from him. They said nothing, even as Jack ran his hands over his face with a loud groan, and it was Jack who broke the silence with a muttered:

“About that profile . . .”

“What *about* the profile?”

“Hannibal noticed some similarities in the profiles for each kill.”

“I should hope so; same killer, same profile.”

“The *problem* is that with Hannibal’s profile on top of Will’s -?” Jack waved a hand in circles. “It kind of highlights stuff we didn’t consider before, like two separate overlays making obvious the same parts on both; it kind of . . . aligns. With Will being out of his mind

-? I don't know. I don't like to give it much thought, but it becomes hard not to at a certain point."

"Yeah, see, I don't think Will *is* out of his mind."

"At this point, that's my greatest fear . . ."

Jack winced. He kept his head down, as he brushed past Beverly into the lounge. The scent was still strong, with the added noise of the various investigators muttering about the case, and his fingers were pressed deep into the bridge of his nose, while his other hand rested on his hip. The few remaining investigators parted like the red sea before Jack, with each of them muttering apologies and finding work in other corners of the lounge, and Beverly followed behind at a safe distance, always keeping a good few paces between them. Jack stopped dead and said:

"Will fits the profile, Beverly."

"We are looking for someone with connections to law enforcement," continued Hannibal. "I do not believe that they are currently in the profession themselves, at least not directly, as the victims are those whose indiscretions were public knowledge, as opposed to something gleaned from confidential records or insider information. The information he has upon safe-houses, court-rooms, etc. is yet uncannily relevant, as if he is still somehow associated with the profession in some manner . . . a private investigator, a teacher at the academy . . .

"He would need to be physically fit to stage the bodies, with knowledge of anatomy on some level, and his sewing abilities suggest some deeper skills. I would suggest say a butcher or surgeon, but the reality is that many hobbies and crafts could allow for a familiarity with a needle and thread. He would need to own property, preferably secluded to work as needed on his victims, or at least with sound-proofed areas, and would likely be an alpha –"

"You're sure?" Beverly asked. "What happened to not knowing his dynamic?"

"*Will* couldn't name a dynamic," muttered Jack.

"Indeed," continued Hannibal. "Let us consider that most violent crimes are committed by alpha males, and that statistics show quite clearly that we ought to be looking towards someone of that specific dynamic. They are most likely early twenties to mid-forties, white, and working to middle-class. I would go to say that they would show some mental disturbances, but overall be able to pass enough as neurotypical that he would go unobserved in order to go unnoticed."

"That does sound like Will," whispered Beverly.

"It does, does it not?"

Hannibal smirked. Beverly clenched her fists. A long exhale escaped her lungs, as she lifted her head high and met his gaze without a single blink, but soon his smile was broken from view. Jack stepped between them and clapped a hand on Beverly's shoulder. It squeezed with a paternal familiarity, like one would a child or protégé, and soon he stepped around her and

observed the lounge. The crime-scene was immaculate. It was cleaned too much for one in the throes of mental illness, but just enough for one with forensic knowledge. Jack whispered:

“We have to consider it, Bev.”

A glimmer of movement caught her gaze. Hannibal stood to one side, where his long fingers picked at a seemingly imaginary spot of lint upon his lapel, and his expression – caught between a smile and a frown – brought a shiver down her spine. He was an omega, but also an older man and one far leaner than his counterparts, and yet he seemed to wear his weakness as if it were a strength . . . as if there were hidden depths . . . hidden skills, hidden muscles. Beverly asked:

“Can I have a word with Hannibal a second?”

“Of course,” said Hannibal.

Jack grunted, as Beverly slipped past the threshold. A gentle touch of the door pushed it almost closed, enough that the room darkened and shadows lengthened, and their only witness – in the lonely bedroom – was the corpse upon the mattress. Beverly nodded towards a far corner. Hannibal followed with swift steps, until he stopped at the foot of the bed. He was directly before their latest victim, with the eyes of the head seemingly following him about the bedroom, and yet he paid it no mind, but instead politely looked to Beverly as she said coldly:

“Will told me what happened between you.”

“Ah, about his attack on me . . .”

“Yeah, well, that’s one word for what happened.” Beverly sighed. “Look, I don’t know why you haven’t brought it up . . . everyone reacts to trauma in different ways, I guess, but if you think that Will is a freaking serial killer – *really* think that – then why wouldn’t you bring it up now? I mean, doesn’t Jack have a right to know? It’d cement the evidence against Will, right?”

“I do not want to bias Jack any further, Ms Katz. If I have given you the impression that I believe Will to be some sort of monster, I have not only done great harm unto you, but I have failed Will in the process . . . Will is my friend, after all. I cannot believe the worst in him.”

“Yeah, the friend who allegedly *raped* you.”

“He was deep in a rut, not to mention that he has a proven hormone imbalance. I would not hold his actions against him. It is true that they left a deep trauma upon me, but there is a saying in English, is there not? ‘Hate the sin, not the sinner’. I loathe what occurred, but I cannot condemn a man that was not in his right state of mind. I maintain that I wish for what happened to remain between Will and me; I would not see him alienated for what was beyond his control.”

“You know ‘control’ is a funny thing,” said Beverly. “Will has this hanging over him, but it’s you that gets to decide whether anyone gets told or not . . . just like it’s you that gets to decide how the story’s told and what version of events is ‘true’. Will has a totally different memory of events, but it seems pretty easy to convince him he’s the problem.”

“What are you suggesting?”

“I’m – I’m not suggesting anything . . . I just wish I understood you, that’s all. I don’t get how you can be so *calm*! You say that Will raped you, which you don’t think is relevant to the case, and then you come up with this profile that makes it sound like Will is the Jigsaw Killer. Will gave us Budge’s name, so we’re one killer down, and all our attention is on him, but you and Will seem to want us to go on some wild goose chase after Will as well, and I just -!”

Beverly pressed her thumb to her temple. The open palm led to a strange gesture, while her other hand rested on her hip, and – for a brief moment – her eyes closed, while she took in a deep breath and tried to slow the beating of her heart. Hannibal adjusted the cuffs of his shirt. He raised an eyebrow at one, as it refused to be perfectly aligned with his jacket, but a subtle angling of his body allowed him to steal glances at Beverly, even as he kept an impassive expression. It forced her muscles to tense, as her hands turned into fists. He asked in a slow voice:

“Did Will say something, Ms Katz?”

“If you say anything to Jack, I’ll be forced to call you a liar.” Beverly shrugged. “I prefer to let the evidence speak for itself and all this is so . . . so . . . so *circumstantial*. He thinks that he might be the Jigsaw Killer, but he’s – I don’t know – confused about the whole thing . . . I know that he thinks that Abigail can be the start of a new ‘person’, but I don’t get why he’d assume Abigail is dead of all things? I mean, even if she were then it could be –”

“It could be someone close to him and not necessarily him.”

“Exactly,” said Beverly. “I feel like he’s driving himself crazy. It’s like his hormone imbalance is pairing off with whatever is this infection, and together he’s just . . . *ugh* . . . manipulated by himself or others or even just delusional. If I could just get something concrete, maybe I could reassure him he’s not the killer. I just need something I can *see* with my own eyes!”

“Like this?”

A hand slipped into the jacket pocket. It caught something inside, before slowly pulling out and opening to reveal a tiny object on a pale palm. The item looked like a lure, one hand-crafted with precision detail, and it was entwined with a strand or two of hair, one a deep shade of brown that could have belonged easily to Abigail or Alana. Hannibal frowned. It was almost too exact a frown, like one assumed by a brilliant stage actor, and again Beverly tensed with veins bulging on her fists, as she dropped them to her side and kept them trembling in place.

“I believe it’s Abigail’s hair,” said Hannibal.

“What? Like a trophy?”

“It could be more innocent than that.” Hannibal shook his head. “It may be that he took a strand of her hair much as one would take a lock of hair for a locket, especially as they very much enjoyed fishing together. Still, I cannot help but fear it may be more sinister.”

“I’ll have Price run some tests, but tell Jack nothing.”

“Not until it’s a certainty?”

“Even then,” muttered Beverly. “I’ll check it out, though.”

Hannibal extended his hand. The lure sat between them, waiting to be taken, and Beverly bit into the inside of her cheek to hold back her tongue . . . *not admissible in court* . . . *circumstantial* . . . it took all her strength to still her hand and bring it towards the lure. It was warm against her skin from the time it spent in his pocket and against his grip, and somehow it made a simple exchange of an item eerily intimate. Beverly slid the lure into her pocket, before a knock came at the door with enough force that it slid open a few more inches. Jack poked his head inside and asked:

“Are you guys all done?”

“I believe so.” Hannibal smiled. “We need to find both Tobias Budge and Will Graham. If there is something to the profile, and assuming Will to be connected to the Jigsaw Killer, then we can assume that he will be seeking after the Chesapeake Ripper. The two have been communicated through their kills, but also now there is nothing to lose for either man . . .”

“So we’ve gone past love-letters and down to an in-person meet-up?”

“I believe it possible. Even if Will is not the killer, he has lost Abigail, and – assuming her taken by one or the other – he would have motivation to go after them regardless, but especially Tobias Budge as the only identity known to him. I suggest we seek to find both.”

“Find one and find the other, eh?”

“I say so, yes,” said Hannibal.

Jack cursed. He pushed open the door. The sound of his pacing footsteps echoed about the bedroom, while silence lay beyond the doorway to the lounge beyond, and – without a look – Beverly knew that no one remained in the apartment apart from the three of them. Jack kept a hand over his mouth and his head down low. He furrowed his brow as if deep in thought, while occasional harsh intakes of breath would fill the room, like a sentence aborted before it even had a chance at life. Beverly waited. He punched at his palm and turned to face them.

“Will would be the easier one to catch,” muttered Jack.

“Yeah, he would,” conceded Beverly.

Hannibal said nothing. Jack looked between Beverly and Hannibal, with one half-smiling and one half-frowning, and – shaking his head – he waved a dismissive hand at them, before

storming back to the lounge and muttering complaints as he walked. Hannibal gestured for Beverly to follow first. She stayed still. The two looked locked eyes again without a word, until something smashed from inside the lounge, and Jack screamed out:

“It’s time to goddamned go!”

Chapter 14

“I don’t get it,” said Brian.

Jimmy said nothing. He stood at the far end of the classroom, where the camera still rested on its tripod, and around him a variety of numbered flags marked potential evidence, until the floor was awash with yellow paper on tiny wooden bases. It was an eerie silence that pervaded the area, made worse by the absence of technicians and officers. The gossip and bickering from the hallway was a reminder of the life that previously infested the crime-scene, but now it was up to the two of them to fill the space of a full investigative team. Jimmy sighed.

The rows of benches filled the right side of the classroom, much like a movie theatre, and they faced an old blackboard unchanged by the decades, which was crossed at points with a bar to allow it to rotate in place for extra room for more information. In front of the blackboard, an overhead projector sat with its light stir whirring and a sheet on its surface. The legal jargon was colour-coordinated and contained several small diagrams. Jimmy asked:

“What’s to get?”

Brian scoffed. He dragged his feet down the aisle. The body was propped in the leather chair by the instructors’ desk, with its hand outstretched with a pointer, and – with little irony – towards the word ‘*homicide*’, as if mocking the investigative team. A visible scar ran over the shoulder, where the short-sleeve shirt betrayed two different skin-tones between limb and chest. Brian knelt down before it and took a closer images with his work-camera, while the flash let loose huge bursts of light that burned into the retinas, and he hissed out in a low voice:

“Why dump another body so close to the fourth?”

Jimmy gave a non-committal hum, before he laid out some paperwork on a desk. The various photographs of the first three bodies stared back at him, with glassy eyes behind glossy paper, and each one was posed in a different manner to the last. He ignored the flashes and snaps, until a warm body came to stand beside him. A whiff of cheap cologne washed over him. He breathed deep with a half-smile, as the familiar scent hid that of death and decay. Brian stood close enough to touch, as he pushed the photographs into an order and asked in a gravelly voice:

“Why now? Why so soon?”

“Didn’t Will theorise these killings were in response to the Ripper?”

“Yeah, Will theorised a lot of things,” muttered Brian. “I mean, I like the guy and all –”

“No, you don’t.”

“– okay, I don’t, but I don’t *dislike him*, which is the same thing and –”

“I mean, it’s not really,” teased Jimmy.

“But my *point* is that he’s kind of out of his mind. The guy has some hormone balance and unidentified infection, right? It could be anything from a brain tumour to encephalitis to schizophrenia, so – well – should we *really* be taking his word on stuff? Not to mention that word on the street is that he’s a suspect himself, so he could be trying to throw us off.”

“Wait, ‘word on the street’?”

Brian turned his head. The glare he sent Jimmy struggled to be serious, especially when Jimmy barely suppressed his laughter and raised his hands in mock surrender, and – with an unwanted smile – Brian shook his head and turned back to his work. Jimmy nudged him in his side. He nudged back. They stopped only when the door opened a crack, before quickly closing, as someone was called away before they could enter. Brian blushed and shrugged.

“I can be cool,” said Brian.

“Well, it’s certainly ‘hip’ how you try to not be ‘square’.”

The pout brought laughter from Jimmy, who nudged him again in his side. This brought a loud ‘hey’ from Brian, who caught his wrist and pulled him close, and – chest to chest – the two blushed and fell silent, until their foreheads met and lips nearly touched. Jimmy forced a hand between their mouths. The lips were soft against his palm, but the glare from Brian made clear his displeasure at the lost kiss and moment of distraction, before Jimmy whispered: *‘not at work’*. Jimmy moved back to the body, while Brian perused the paperwork and asked:

“Okay, so why *is* the Jigsaw Killer leaving two kills at once?”

“Well,” sighed Jimmy, “I would suggest that the main theory is he’s killing in response to the Chesapeake Ripper, and if we’re close to finding the Chesapeake Ripper, he’s no reason to keep leaving little kills around for the press to report about . . . I mean, it’d *also* suggest he’s closer ties to the investigation than we accounted for in the profiles –”

“You mean *Will’s* profile,” sighed Brian.

“Let’s think about this a second. If this is Will, he fits the profile and is close to the case, and – having found the Ripper – he’ll have no reason to keep his last few victims, so he might as well ditch them, right? If the Jigsaw Killer isn’t Will then maybe . . . maybe it’s someone involved in the investigation in some way, in which case Will is a good scapegoat, isn’t he?”

“I mean . . . I *guess*.”

“The killer wouldn’t even need to make evidence stick against Will. They’d just need to distract us with Will long enough to ditch the bodies, then ensure the Chesapeake Ripper is caught, which – I have to say – was probably hugely helped by Will’s involvement. Over time, the Ripper can go down as one of the world’s biggest unsolved mysteries. It’s almost ideal.”

“Except for the fact he killed six innocent people to do it.”

“I suppose it’s hardly a public service when put that way . . .”

“Well, except for the lawyer,” teased Brian.

Jimmy raised an eyebrow at Brian. He caught the shrug and all-too-innocent ‘what’, before rolling his eyes and laughing a little despite the gravity of the situation. They continued to work in silence, while an assistant ran down the aisle with a new folder, and quickly handed it to Brian, before darting back outside in a rush to process further evidence. The fourth body was prominently displayed in photographs alongside the others, as Brian opened the folder and started work on a makeshift timeline. Jimmy crouched down by their fifth body and said:

“I suppose he still has plans for the sixth body.”

“Like he had plans for the arm?”

A white, feminine arm lay on the body of the fifth body. It was strewn across the lap, with the hand of the body rested on the smooth skin with an almost loving touch, and there was no way that it belonged to any of the six known victims . . . *a different shade, a different shape* . . . Jimmy stood slowly with a crick of his back. He walked back over to Brian, before slapping a hand on his upper back and letting it trail away until his hand dropped limply at his side, and together they continued to stare at the stray and errant arm upon that dead lap.

“The arm the body is holding -?”

“It’s Miriam Lass,” sighed Brian. “It checks out.”

A cold shudder ran through Jimmy. He pointed a finger towards the staged body and random arm, almost with an accusatory wag that betrayed the tremble to his frame, and – after swallowing hard the bile that built in the back of his throat – he let loose a staggered sigh. Brian opened his mouth to speak. He closed it again. The awkward sounds of a ticking clock marked the seconds, as both avoided the eyes of one another, and the weight of the arm hung between them, as their gazes kept returning to it . . . watching it, as if it may move again . . . Jimmy choked out:

“Does Jack know we found her arm?”

“Do *you* want to make that phone call?” Brian shook his head. “I got the head’s up that he’s gone with Beverly to chase after Will, something about the Hobbs cabin, and Dr Lecter suggested a few other places Will might have gone. You find Will, you find the Ripper. I don’t want to be the one to mention Lass, set Jack off, and have him shoot first and ask questions later.”

“Is Dr Lecter still with them?”

“I got the impression he’s going to check out the Hobbs house. I called back-up to both places, just on the off-chance, and there’s paramedics standing by for Will, but the arm . . . that’s not the Jigsaw Killer’s MO, Jimmy. It’s also *really* unlikely that’s the Chesapeake

Ripper leaving behind the fucking arm, because -! Because -! . . . Jesus, we *know* Tobias is the Ripper, and there's *no* way that he had time to find out about this kill and leave an arm behind!"

"Not to mention, we have no traces of Lass in his place," muttered Jimmy. "We're still analysing all of Tobias' strings, but I doubt any will belong to Miriam, and we never found a body . . . if this is the Jigsaw Killer, it means that he's breaking his own pattern. It means . . . it means that he might have other kills, which means he might have taken Abigail Hobbs after all."

"Yeah, but for what purpose?"

"Who knows? We don't even know who Miriam was investigating . . . thanks to Jack, she was going off book and doing her own thing . . . I can only suggest looking for killers that overlap with the Chesapeake Ripper profile, but that leads us back to a *lot* of people and a *huge* internal investigation. It could be you, me, Will . . . even Jack and Dr Lecter fit the profile . . ."

"Well, not you or Lecter."

"Wait, why not?"

"You know –" Brian gestured to his lower abdomen "– that whole omega thing."

Jimmy cast him a cold look. He lowered his head, so that the low lights of the classroom emphasised the lines of age about his face, and he took a step back from Brian, while his arms slid into a crossed position over his chest. Brian rolled his eyes. He swung himself towards the array of papers and files and photographs, while the blush mingled with the pout into a conflicted expression, and he sought his best to avoid looking towards Jimmy. The clock ticked on by, until Jimmy stood directly at his side and cleared his throat to say in a slow and firm voice:

"I wasn't aware possessing a uterus made one incapable of murder."

"Aw, come on, don't twist what I said," whined Brian.

"Look, the point is this guy could be more dangerous than we thought," said Jimmy. "I want you to bring up all reports of the Copycat Killer, and then I want all records of the Chesapeake Ripper to compare. I think that his role as the Jigsaw Killer served a purpose, and – while I don't know *what* – it means Miriam might have served a purpose to him, too."

"It's all useless until we find the sixth body, you know that."

"No, I *don't*, and I'll tell you one thing . . . Miriam was alive when the arm was taken. It means we're dealing with one heck of a sadist, or she could still be alive, in which case I think we can rule out Will as the Jigsaw Ripper. Not only does Will *not* have the money or property to hide a missing person for all those years, but he also probably has more than enough alibis with his work as a police officer at the time and being a few cities over."

“So Will’s innocent?”

“*If* we say that the Jigsaw Killer took Miriam -? Yeah.”

Brian sagged. The muscles drained of all tension. A heavy exhale hissed from his parted lips, as he ran his callused hands over his fatigued face, and finally – with a half-smile – his eyes moved back to Jimmy, who clapped a hand on his shoulder and squeezed. Brian slid his hand over Jimmy’s, before he gave a soft squeeze and nodded his head in a rapid manner, and his lips parted and closed in search of half-formed words, before finally he laughed and pulled away. Jimmy gave him a minute to compose himself, before he rolled back his shoulders and stood tall.

“I want to check the records first, but the Copycat Killer also took organs.” Jimmy winced. “I think we could link them together, which would change the entire investigation *and* profile, and it could also exonerate Will, assuming we can prove that the Jigsaw Killer took Miriam’s arm. In which case, Will could be walking straight into the arms of a serial killer for no reason at all . . .”

“And the Chesapeake Ripper? How will he react to Will?”

“I don’t know, but I don’t want to find out. Tobias Budge hasn’t touched any of his funds, at least the ones that we know about, and we have his passport and froze his accounts . . . he’ll only have his car, cash on hand, and he’s nothing left to lose. He might have even taken Abigail.”

“So you have a man with a personal grudge against Will, basically.”

“Yeah, but who doesn’t have a grudge against Will?”

Jimmy tried to smile, but it died on his lips before it was born. He gestured for Brian to clear up the photographs and files, and waited patiently while the rustle of paper was shoved into the manila folders that were each marked with various labels and dates, until – finally – Brian was at his side with camera slung over his shoulder. A rumble of his stomach spoke of the missed candlelit dinner, where dinner would likely be warmed in a microwave and eaten on the sofa, before the darkness overtook them with nightmares and insomnia. Brian said:

“Will definitely would have gone to the Hobbs place.”

“So we tell Jack and Hannibal,” said Jimmy.

“And send back-up?”

“And send *more* back-up, yeah.”

Jimmy kept his head low, as he walked towards the main doors. Brian stood still with a puzzled expression, before his eyes burst wide and he raced to catch up, and soon dropped into sync a few feet behind Jimmy, as he matched his pace almost step for step. The doors threw open before them and bright lights temporarily blinded them, as they stepped into the

throngs of technicians and officers, and made their way quickly through the college to the car-park. Brian whispered:

"I just hope we get there before Will."

* * *

It was cold inside the vehicle. Hannibal sat behind the steering wheel, where his gloved hands creaked with leather upon leather, and he drew in a deep breath that stung the back of his throat, before exhaling in a grey cloud that burst before him. He watched from the darkness the house in the distance, where the word '*Cannibalism'* was still scrawled across the garage in a hideous hand. The street was empty . . . quiet . . . enough that – as he pressed the button on his phone – the ringing tone was almost deafening to sensitive ears. A voice answered quickly:

'Hello, Tobias Budge speaking.'

"I assumed that you would have disposed of this phone," said Hannibal. "It will not be long before they uncover your personal number, through which they shall use the GPS and tower pings to work out your movements . . . I do hope you have not gone far, Tobias."

He returned his hands to the wheel, as the hands-free set let out a strange static. A burst of noise followed, like a car door slamming or an exterior door shutting, and the background noise fell silent, only broken by heavy and hissed breaths. Hannibal adjusted the rear-view mirror. He angled his head in the shadows, so as to see his complexion, and pulled at his cheeks with a steady hand, before pulling his collar to a more flattering position. Tobias eventually spoke, but his voice was cold and heavy and held a sharp edge, as he spat out:

'What do you want?'

"I want to warn you that you have nowhere to run," said Hannibal. "Of course, I will tell the FBI that I rang you to warn you that you must turn yourself into the authorities. In the meantime, I am currently at the Hobbs abode . . . Will shall be here soon; it seems that someone has made him believe that he is the Jigsaw Killer. That was very naughty, Tobias."

'Garrett Jacob Hobbs? Will is at his home?'

"He will be . . . in time."

'And you think I care enough to go after Will?'

"I think you will not want for Will to lay claim to the kills of the Chesapeake Ripper." Hannibal smiled. "It would be all too easy to blame Will for the kills to which they cannot find evidence, or to even make him into an 'accomplice' that enabled you to go uncaught for so long."

'You're making me choose between my survival or my reputation.'

"Surely, you could not have done this alone? You must have been helped in your kills."

Hannibal smiled. The reflection was dark and shadows broke under his eyes, while he glanced beneath the metal rim through the windows towards the house, and while its windows stood black and empty, he knew soon it would be lit bright and full of life. He licked at his lips, as his hands moved to the phone in its stand. The long finger hovered over the red button, while the seconds ticked by and Tobias waited for a response, and Hannibal waited until he heard an intake of breath, one ready for words, before he chirped out in a warm voice:

"I shall let you decide which is more important."

He pressed the red button. The call ended. He sank back into his chair, as he drew in a deep breath, and – relishing in the peaceful quiet – reached out to flick through the contacts, while his free hand fell to his stomach and rested lightly against the thick material of his coat. A familiar name came into view at the very end of the list. He let his finger hover over the simple 'Will'. He paused. A smile broke across his lip again, as he slowly pressed at the name and waited.

'He-Hello? Hannibal? Is – Is that you?'

"Yes, Will. It is me . . ."

Chapter 15

Abigail beckoned.

The sight was a vague blur; a strange figure on the side of the road. The brown locks of hair were untouched by the wind, and her outstretched arm seemed longer than natural, as if reaching through time space into his moving vehicle. A glow made her stand out in the darkness . . . colour on a black-and-white film . . . he slammed on the brakes. The car screeched and left marks along the road, while swinging a hundred-and-eighty degrees.

The headlights fell onto the spot where she stood. She was gone. Will cried out, while hands scrambled for the handle of the car . . . clawing, scratching . . . blood dripped from a broken nail . . . he forced open the door and stumbled onto the embankment. The grass was wet underfoot. The mud was soft and squelched with each step. He slid down the steep incline into a mass of trees, with dirt cloying and clawing at the fabric of his trousers. The beating of his heart was loud enough that he feared it would burst. Tears spilled over his cheeks.

'Abigail?' Will cried. 'Abigail!'

A shadow moved among the trees . . . a deer, a stag . . . a black figure with horns that threatened to force it onto all fours from the sheer weight, but instead it darted – in and out, in and out – of the trees, luring Will into a chase. He saw her. He saw her chased by the stag. Will struggled to keep up, as he called her name . . . begged the stag to leave her alone . . . a few times he stumbled, until he was caked in mud and his clothes grew heavy. He fought to make sound as his mouth ran dry. He fought to move as his limbs trembled. Will sobbed.

There were sirens in the distance. They wailed along the road, casting long shadows about the trees, and each flash . . . bright, red, blue . . . distorted the shadows and brought the stag in and out of view, until only Abigail was visible. He stopped. The sirens were gone. Abigail stood on the very edge of the woods, where she brought her hand to the lips in a shushing motion. He slowed. He staggered towards her smiling form. He reached towards her shoulder.

A phone rang.

Will looked down. It was in his hands, with the cold plastic sticking to his sweat-soaked skin. He looked back, but she was gone . . . lost among a garden, lost underneath the black sky . . . he cast his eyes over every inch of land, only to see her at last . . . he saw her by the house. Will laughed. It was a hollow and broken sound. He ran a hand over his face, soaked with tears and mucus, before fumbling with the phone and stabbing at the flashing green icon. The phone struggled to stay at his ear, as his hands refused to keep a firm hold. He choked out:

'He-Hello? Hannibal? Is – Is that you?'

'Yes, Will. It is me.'

* * *

“I must ask you a question, Will.”

Hannibal adjusted his lapels. The coat kept him warm in these colder climes, but it did little to keep the chill from his cheeks, as the heat from the radiators finally died away from the lack of electricity to the vehicle. A burst of warm breath steamed before him. He brought his gloved hands to his mouth and breathed some life back into the flesh, while he continued to watch the house from the distance. The secluded area led to little traffic. There were no people, no vehicles, and no animals. There was only an eerie silence broken only by the voice of Will.

‘W-What? What question? Have you seen her?’

“Will? Who have I seen?”

‘Abi-Abigail . . . he’s chasing her . . . the Jigsaw Killer is chasing her. I saw him. He’s in these woods . . . somewhere . . . somewhere close . . . I can’t quite catch her, but she’s home now and she’ll be safe. I’ll find her. I’ll find her, Hannibal. He won’t hurt her.’

Hannibal took in a deep breath. It burned at the back of his throat, as his chest expanded and sank in time with the inhalation and exhalation, and his eyes instinctively moved with a slow gaze over the periphery of the small woodland behind the Hobbs house. The darkness was broken by only the moonlight and stars above, so that every burst of wind and rustle of leaves became an incomprehensible blur of black, and his vision struggled to adjust to such a distance, as he squinted in search of something recognisable. He asked in a whisper:

“Will, do you know the time?”

‘I – I lost track . . . lost time . . . I’m close.’

“Abigail is missing . . .”

‘No, she’s not! I saw her – I saw her here . . . in the bureau, the woods –’

“No, Will.” Hannibal feigned a sigh. “We checked the security cameras and you left alone. Abigail followed later, but – after that – we lost track of both of you . . . we only found you once you arrived at Beverly’s office, and even then you ran once left unattended. You mention the woods? Are you near trees now, Will? A forest or copse, perhaps?”

‘I – I see a house . . . I saw her go inside; I’m going to follow, but it’s dark and he’s out here. I can feel him . . . he’s watching from the trees, waiting for me to find her, so he can find me, and I – I don’t – I don’t know what to do . . . I don’t know what to do!’

“Will, listen to my voice. Focus on the present.”

‘It’s her house. It’s Abigail’s house!’

A smile broke across his features. He gently took the phone from its hands-free set, before he moved it to his ear and quietly took a hold of the door handle. It took little effort to push it ajar, but – even with the electricity having recently been switched off – his eyes darted to the interior light, where he paused to make certain that the darkness remained. A low hum fell

from his lips, as he pushed open the door and climbed outside. It closed behind him with a soft click. He stood leant against the cold metal, while he lowered his voice and said in hushed tones:

"They think that Abigail was taken by the Jigsaw Killer."

A high-pitched cry echoed through the phone. It was short and shallow, followed by muffled and mumbled sobs that seemed stifled by a hand, and finally there came laughter . . . broken, inhuman . . . it stopped and tuned into silence. Hannibal continued to scan his surroundings. A figure staggered out of the trees and along the perimeter of the back garden, while Hannibal darted into the shadows and over the road. He hid behind a tree. Will moved into the open. He watched from behind the rough bark, while Will stumbled and asked on his knees:

'Is – Is it Tobias? Or was it me?'

"Do you believe yourself to be the Jigsaw Killer?"

'I don't know who I am anymore.' Will sobbed. 'Tobias said it was me. He said I was the Jigsaw Killer. I don't know if he was lying . . . I don't know . . . I just know it – it doesn't – it doesn't matter, because I – I – I can understand him. It's not me, but it could *be me. I can see into his head and I . . . I feel comfortable there . . . I don't know where Hobbs starts and the Jigsaw Killer ends, but they're both in me . . . they're a part of me . . . I – I'm* scared*, Hannibal.'*

"Will, I could never bring myself to believe you to be a killer, but you do fit the profile and I must be honest with you . . . Jack believes you could be a suspect." Hannibal paused. "He is at the Hobbs hunting lodge with Beverly in search of you, and I suspect there will police soon to arrive both here and at the lodge. It would be best for you to wait where you are."

'Why? So they can arrest me? Take Abigail from me?'

"I will be there soon. I am in my car now, and I will be there to defend you from their accusations, especially as none of this is your fault. You are ill, Will. We will get you into hospital and make sure you are cured of this infection, but . . . I – I must ask one question. I need you to be honest with me. I need you to promise you won't lie to me."

Will said nothing. He struggled to his feet, even as he half-crawled and half-sprinted towards the house, and the phone in his hand hung limp at his side, while he swayed dramatically from side-to-side in a mockery of what should have been a straight line. Hannibal kept his phone to his cheek, while the black of his coat hid him in the line of trees on the property perimeter. The distance between them was enough that vision was obscured, but close enough a single yell would be able to penetrate into Will's senses, even as Will reached the back door.

A car pulled up towards the front of the house, where it slowed to a steady stop. The lights were visible from Hannibal's vantage point, forcing him to retreat further into the trees, until his view of the rear of the house was obscured through more trunks and branches. A figure emerged from the car, one dressed in a slim suit that clung to his figure, and dark skin that

made his features difficult to discern in the darkness. Tobias stood straight. He moved to the front door.

Will was nowhere to be seen. The back door swung on its hinge, while a light flashed on from somewhere inside the house, and a series of panted breaths emitted through the phone, interrupted by occasional moans and drawls of the word '*Abigail'*. Hannibal licked at his lips, while he stepped back to the very edge of the woodland. He moved slowly through the rear of the garden, while a shadowy figure inside the house followed the lights as they brightened a path, until Will and Tobias became almost interchangeable in sight. Hannibal rolled back his shoulders.

"I found one of your lures," he said.

'Yeah? I should hope so. I keep them on the hall mantelpiece.'

"Yes, but this one seems to have a strand of Abigail's hair."

The lights came on in the back bedroom. It was Abigail's old bedroom, and one in which was now empty and abandoned, with only a few old memories to remind one that it once belonged to a young girl that grew to become a young woman. A slight oil stain sat on the far corner of a carpet, while a mist of hairspray covered one corner of the window, and a series of marks on the doorframe chronicled growth over the years. It was silent inside. The phone made so little noise, even from the previous heavy breaths, that Hannibal worried Will had hung up the connection.

'I'm sorry,' whispered Will.

The phone went dead. Hannibal crept closer to the back door. It was difficult to gain a clear view from how it swung, casting moving shadows beyond, but – with careful timing – he slipped through the gap without forcing the squeaking hinges out of their natural rhythm. A shadow moved through a far corridor towards the stairwell. Hannibal removed his shoes at the back door, before carefully placing them on the empty countertop, and moved swiftly through the ground floor on socked feet towards the same stairwell. The top step squeaked above him.

Hannibal followed, but kept to the sides of the stairs. He removed the gloves from his hands, so that his hands could brush along the surface of the banister without a sound, and the phone dropped into his pocket with his free hand . . . *'no, no, I don't believe you!'* . . . *'tell me where she is!'* . . . the cries above grew incoherent. The shouts and screams descended into a cacophony of gasps and sobs and cries, while Will paced with heavy footsteps.

The sounds increased in frequency and duration. They were loud enough to pierce the ears, sending a wave of pain each time they struck almost impossible notes, and they grew so fast that they were an almost a chant . . . *'no, no, no'* . . . Hannibal stopped. He finally reached the top of the staircase, where silence pervaded . . . a far cry from the chaos, a large change from the insanity, and now there was nothing. There were no screams, breaths, footsteps . . . there was nothing . . . nothing until a gunshot pierced through the landing until his ears rang.

Hannibal sprinted forward.

He stopped just short of Abigail's bedroom. The light was angled in such a way as to avoid casting a shadow inside, where Tobias stood with his back to the door, and – breathing deep – Hannibal caught the scent of blood and sweat, which was almost soaked into Tobias' skin. It was impossible to see through or around him. Hannibal felt his heartbeat quicken. He clenched his fists, while his eyes darted in search of a bullet wound or damage, until Will finally appeared from the other side of Tobias . . . he paced, he hunched . . . his head was in his hand.

"Don't lie to me!"

"You're sick," said Tobias. "You should let me help you."

"You – You just . . . you took her . . . *you must have done* . . ."

Will was flushed. The tears were wet on his red cheeks. A mixture of saliva and mucus rested on his stubble-covered chin, while his bloodshot eyes darted around . . . seeing yet unseeing . . . a hand was buried deep in his hair, while the other hung limp at his side. He held the gun with a tight grip, until his hand looked deathly white from the pressure. The contortions of his face were monstrous. He choked and spluttered, while his body trembled, and every step twisted his ankle at awkward angles, until the finally stumbled and caught himself against the back wall.

He half-collapsed against the plaster, where he pressed arm to wall and head to arm. Will wept. He hunched forward, and his chest heaved with each retched cry, until – at last – vomit spilled onto the floor with a sharp stench and wet splatter. A heavy sweat ran down his back, until his shirt clung to his skin with a visible dark mark. He kept his head low. Hannibal cast his eyes quickly between Tobias and Will, as he counted the steps between each man.

Tobias slowly stepped forward. He slid a hand into his pocket, before pulling out something hard to see in the darkness . . . something that bled into his hand . . . only when his other hand came into play, unwrapping the item with a skilful touch, did it become recognisable: cat-gut string. It stretched out before him with an ominous shadow, so that the string was visible from the hallway, and his hands rose higher and higher, as he stepped closer and closer. Hannibal took in a hissed breath, as he silently walked into the room a few steps behind Tobias.

"You only get one chance at a final victim," said Tobias.

Tobias edged closer, until the strings were over Will's head. Hannibal lunged. He threw his arms around that toned waist, before using his full weight to knock Tobias hard onto the bare floor, where they rolled and tussled and struggled. Tobias found an upper-hand, where he sat astride Hannibal and grabbed the cat-gut string in one hand. He whipped it down. The string landed an inch from Hannibal's head, as he quickly shot his head to the side in a desperate attempt to escape the lacerating blow. The string came down again. This time it cut into his cheek.

A low growl rumbled from Hannibal's throat. He waited for Tobias to lift his arm, ready to throw down the string as a whip once more, and head-butt him hard against his nose, causing a burst of blood to shoot forth down Tobias' face. It was just enough to gain an advantage.

Hannibal twisted and threw Tobias from him onto the carpet, but – as he attempted to dive again – Tobias kicked hard with the sole of his foot. The blow smashed into Hannibal's stomach, sending him reeling back and rolling over the floor. He stopped. He spluttered.

The pain was intense, shooting down through his spine. He fell onto his back, where his hands clamoured and pulled at his shirt buttons, and – ripping open the fabric – a small red mark was visible on the pale flesh, enough to show a soon-to-be bruise. Hannibal forced himself into a sitting position, before a heavy foot slammed into his chest. It knocked the wind from him. Tobias towered above. The glint of a smile broke across those dark features, as bright eyes stared hard at his pained expression, and Hannibal smiled back, as he lay still against the floor.

"I should have known," spat Tobias.

"You crossed a line, Tobias."

"Oh? And why is that?" Tobias laughed. "Is that pretty head of Will's yours alone? I bet he doesn't know how you manipulated him . . . *used him* . . . is it really so bad that I put a few little ideas into his head? He *could* be the Jigsaw Killer, after all, unless -?" Tobias gasped. "You mean he's not? Could it be that you know the real identity? What they really want?"

A sharp kick struck at Hannibal's face. It nearly caught his nose, but a quick turn resulted in his upper cheek and eye sustaining the blow. The injury brought laughter from Tobias . . . *foot still raised, balance careful, eyes locked on eyes . . . easy to topple, easy to overpower* . . . the string was whirled around with a free hand. It buzzed through the air. Tobias bore an expression that darkened as he lowered his head, and his foot came down at an odd angle beside Hannibal's head, as he half-smiled and chuckled once more under his breath. Tobias said in a cheerful voice:

"I'll make you confess before I –"

A burst of crimson . . .

The expression died. Hannibal saw red. A smattering of warm liquid sprayed over his cheeks and neck and upper chest, soaking into his clothes and hair, and the taste of it was bitter and metallic on his tongue . . . seeping into his mouth . . . it stopped as soon as it started. A rivulet of blood fell down from a perfectly round wound on Tobias' forehead. He swayed. He spat blood. He slowly fell forward, until he picked up speed and finally crashed down. Hannibal barely rolled out of his way, as his corpse thudded against the carpet and stained it red.

Hannibal crawled to the side, as he kicked Tobias away a few more feet. He looked up. Will stood with a blank expression . . . no sadness, no fear, no anger . . . just eyes that slowly rolled back into his head, until only whites showed, and yet his arm was steady. It continued to point forward, as if Tobias were still there. The aim was perfect. Even as his body violently shook and jolted, his arm was steady like concrete, and his gun never left his hand.

"Will?" Hannibal choked. "*Will*!"

Will collapsed. It was his legs at first, as they crumbled beneath him, before his body followed with remarkable speed, and – finally – his gun-arm dropped lifelessly to the floor, and he lay like a dropped marionette, while his fit slowly started to subside. Hannibal struggled to his feet, as he made towards Will. A sharp pain coursed through his abdomen. He dropped again to his knees, while he put a shaking hand to his behind and pulled it back to see an unwanted sight: blood.

A wail of sirens bellowed out in the distance. It burst through the silence, as Hannibal panted and choked and pressed his hands to his stomach, and soon the flashing lights penetrated their way through the windows, as police cars screeched to the back of the garden. Hannibal lost track of time from Will's fall to the police arrival . . . *minutes, hours* . . . it must have been twenty minutes in total, but the adrenaline was hot in his veins, as his heart raced and his breath escaped him in quick pants. He crawled over to Will and put a hand upon his cheek, as he whispered:

"Help is . . . is on its way . . ."

Chapter 16

It was warm . . .

A thick blanket was draped over his lower limbs. The fabric stopped short of his chest, which was covered in a thin and plain gown, and his arms were somehow weak . . . *heavy, numb, unresponsive* . . . a blurred gaze ran over the bruised flesh. A canulla sat in the crook of the left arm, where it seemed to lead to fluids at the head of the slightly bed. The right arm was attached to a small heart-rate monitor and blood-pressure machine. He groaned.

A shadow broke over him. A figure stood beside him.

Will struggled to lift his head, as an intense fatigue seeped into his muscles. The act of movement was a desperate battle, like caught between sleep and wake, and his limbs felt pressed down by invisible hands, as if the gods themselves willed him immobile. It was either early morning or late evening, as the sunlight was still a reddish hue through the widow, and the long shadows about the room led to an eerie atmosphere. A woman broke into view.

The dark hair was visible first and foremost. The concerned eyes and shaking smile followed, before he caught sight of the scarf about her neck . . . *scar covered, fashionable yet practical* . . . he hummed and grinned, as he tried to raise his hand towards her hand. It was pressed to his head, where it tested for temperature. He failed to make contact. The scent of perfume was sweet and familiar, like that picked by Hannibal as a moving-in gift, and there was another scent, too . . . this was an alpha. He opened his lips to speak, but his mouth was dry as he choked out:

“A-Abigail?”

A straw was pushed to his tongue. He sipped obediently, while someone told him to go slow in a feminine voice, and soon her saw her . . . black wavy hair, dark brown eyes . . . the person holding the glass of water was not Abigail. He choked. The water struck the back of his throat, triggering his gag-reflex, and – as he spluttered and coughed – someone leaned him forward and swatted at his back, until finally the tears stopped and breath returned.

“Nope, just me,” said Beverly.

“I – I’m sorry . . .”

“Hey, don’t look too disappointed.”

He dropped back onto the bed. It was raised into an upright position, as Beverly clicked a button, and soon he was able to cast his eyes across the room. The cards were in the same position as before, along with the table and chairs, and fresh fruit filled a bowl on the windowsill, where a half-eaten box of chocolate sat beside the stalk of what was once grapes. A dressing-gown hung from the door, but all other clothes were missing from sight, as if no

one dared trust him with so much as a pair of pants after his previous escape attempts. He said with a sad laugh:

“I see they even gave me the same room.”

“I asked them about frequent-flier miles,” teased Beverly. “You don’t get a discount on your stay this time around, but next time -? What’s that expression the Brits have? ‘Quid’s in’? I think by your fifth stay, you’d probably get the VIP suite . . . champagne in your IV.”

He laughed. It sent sharp pain through his ribcage. He dropped a hand to his chest, where feel the ribs betrayed an obvious weight-loss, and lightly rubbed at the flesh through the hospital down, as his laugh died into a small chuckle. Beverly sat on the edge of the mattress. It dipped a little under her weight, while she stared towards the window and let the sunlight cast a beautiful glow about her face, even going so far as to tilt it back to catch the warm rays. He smiled and found enough strength in his arms to fold his hands across his stomach, as he muttered:

“Don’t – Don’t make me laugh.”

“Want me to make you cry instead?” Beverly smiled. “I can do that.”

“How about you start by telling me what happened?”

“Well, where to begin?” Beverly bit into her lip. “You left hospital after your first fit, and then we lost track of your whereabouts, but you came to find me . . . it’s your telling me about Tobias Budge, along with the cat-gut, that helped us to pin him down. We lost you again, but we suspected that you’d go looking for Budge, and – well – we were right. You found him.

“We only had the forensic evidence and Hannibal’s word, but from what we can gather -? Budge came behind you to strangle you with some cat-gut and - . . . wait, can we call it ‘cat-gut’? I guess ‘people-gut’ sounds a bit creepy, though, but then he’s a creepy guy . . . well, *was* a creepy guy, I suppose. Anyway, Hannibal jumped him. He attacked Hannibal and while they were fighting, you . . . you shot him. Thanks to you, the Chesapeake Ripper is no more.”

“And my diagnosis?”

“You’ve been under for two weeks; add that to your week unconscious from you last fit, and the day between of escaping hospital to kill a serial killer, and – *woo boy* – you’ve probably had the most interesting month of your life. They did diagnose you, though. I mean, I don’t know if it’s good news or bad news, but it’s news anyway: encephalitis. I mean, touch wood, you should be out in a few days. Dr Bloom wants to throw some sort of party to celebrate, I think.”

Will grunted. The coma would likely have been induced. It explained why people had started eating his gifts without him, including a small Tupperware container on a far table, one that was complete with cloth napkins and silver cutlery, and even items like tissues were running low. He ran his eyes over a far newspaper, which featured the face of some politician, and the bright screen of a charging tablet spoke of a serial rapist with ‘*The Tattler’* marking its

header. It was long enough that he was no longer headline news. He half-closed his eyes. He sighed.

The tension left his muscles, while the beep of the monitor slowed. He noticed that Beverly stared ahead, barely making eye-contact, and – despite being disturbed from her reading – her eyes never went to the tablet whose light dimmed. The frown she wore disappeared each time he made a noise . . . *a clearing throat, a low moan* . . . replaced by a smile that was forced and failed to reach her eyes. He swallowed hard. He asked in a low and quiet voice:

"What aren't you telling me?"

"Nothing," muttered Beverly.

"There's something."

"I don't exactly have evidence to back it up."

"Okay, so present it as a hypothesis," said Will. "If there's any basis to warrant an investigation, we can work together to find the evidence needed. I could do with a distraction right now . . . I've just lost my surrogate daughter, three weeks of my life, and my sanity. I don't even know if there's a career waiting for me at the end. Humour me. What's up?"

"Well, it's just . . . it's just Hannibal was first at the scene."

"Technically, *I* was first at the scene, if my memory isn't too off."

"Yes, but . . . *okay* . . . he was parked outside the Hobbs house before you even arrived! He says it's because he thought you'd turn up, which – fair enough – was our thought, too, but then he's also been on the phone to Tobias *and* you in the lead-up to the attack. He claims he was begging you both to stay away, but it's not like either of you can confirm that . . . is it?"

"I – I don't even remember a phone call," admitted Will.

"I suspected as much," said Beverly. "I mean, I don't mean to imply he's up to anything insidious, because I wouldn't go that far . . . he's a good guy, good at his job . . . but even the best of us can have hero complexes or desires of martyrdom. If he killed Budge, he'd look like a hero and be trusted and loved by everyone, right? If you killed Budge, he'd be the guy that tried to warn you and help you, and . . . well, he's kind of a weird thing for you, so –"

Will lifted a weak hand. It was enough to silence her. A dark blush ran over his cheeks, as he stared at a vague spot across the room, and it was there he spotted two coats on the coat-rack, with only one that looked like it could belong to Beverly. He winced. A faint tear pricked at the corner of his eye, as he drew in a shuddered breath and gnawed at his cheek. The sensation in his limbs slowly returned, but his heart now felt heavy with a weight almost physical. He struggled to find enough breath. He rolled back his head, while staring up at the ceiling.

"I think I ruined any chance of *that*," whispered Will.

“He told me about the alleged ‘rape’, you know,” said Beverly. “Why didn’t he report that? Why didn’t he even go get emergency contraception? Why did he *still* keep visiting your bedside the first time you were in hospital and again even now? I think he’s using this whole situation.”

“He’s using the Chesapeake Ripper case to get closer to me?”

“Either as a concerned citizen or the Jigsaw Killer.”

Will flinched. The weight in his heart spread to his stomach. A wave of nausea burst through him, as bile broke at the back of his throat, and – swallowing it back down – he took in deep and slow breaths in an attempt to steady his increasing heart-rate. He rapidly blinked. The tears that stung at his eyes burned with sweat and antiseptic, as if his skin had been wiped down at some point, and soon his eyes were screwed shut to keep back the pain. Will brought a trembling hand to his mouth, where he covered the twitching and uncontrollable muscles.

“That could still be me,” choked Will.

“*No*, it can’t,” spat Beverly.

He opened his eyes once more. The sight of her was distorted, but he saw enough to know she was staring hard at him and leaning ever closer, until her hand clamped down on his wrist. It was a firm grip, one that almost threatened to bruise, and yet she never once averted her gaze, as she lowered her head and rolled back her shoulders. The flare of her nostrils spoke of a deeper emotion, but something visceral . . . *disgust, betrayal, confusion* . . . Will calmed. He swallowed hard and turned his hand, so that he could hold hers and find some comfort from her warmth.

“Tell me what you know,” pleaded Will.

“I know that we can’t deny Budge was the Ripper,” said Beverly. “I know that Jack found a crap-load of evidence in his basement . . . bank statements, fingerprints, intestines . . . it was like he was so arrogant that he assumed he’d never be under investigation. There was like *zero* attempt to even try and hide what he’d done. It’s a total no-brainer.”

“And the Jigsaw Killer?”

“We’re starting to think he may also be the Copycat Killer. The main connection is that they’re both taking internal organs from their victims, while also almost surgically sewing back up the incisions, and there’s the tenuous connection of timings, too, as the Copycat Killer stopped as soon as the Jigsaw Killer started. They also both fit the same profiles.

“We also . . . we also found Miriam’s arm with victim five.” Beverly winced. “It’s pretty much a given that it was left by the Jigsaw Killer; there was a section of skin missing, but sewn together with the same thread in the same pattern as the incision on Number Five’s torso, and some of Miriam’s blood was found on the shoulders and feet of the victim, too. They were hidden under clothing, and no one could have been in that room other than the killer, so it’s clear it was him.

“The thing is that we don’t know who took Miriam. Jack had her working on her free time, of her own cognisance, and – because it was all under-the-radar – she left no record of the suspects she was investigating or where she’d be or what she found . . . all I can say is we know you’re not the Jigsaw Ripper, because we know you couldn’t have killed Miriam.”

“How can you be certain of that?” Will frowned. “Why did he leave that much evidence that Miriam belonged to him, too? We’d never have pegged them as the same killer without the arm, and now we *know* he took Miriam, too, Jack’s going to have the whole bureau out for him.”

“You said ‘him’. You know you’re not the killer, don’t you?”

“I – I think so? How is it *you* know, though?”

“You don’t fit the profile,” said Beverly. “You also have alibis for that time; you were in the force, you were also in hospital, and you were also in a different state. That’s not to mention that she was kept *alive* when her arm was cut, and the arm is fresh . . . where did you hide her? We can’t find any property where you could stash her. We can’t find phone records, emails . . . we couldn’t even find long absences where you could tend to her or make sure she was alive . . .”

“And you searched my house, my land –?”

“Yeah, we even searched your office and classroom, too.”

A cold silence fell between them. He moved his eye back to the coat-rack, even as he squeezed a little tighter onto her hand . . . *the long black coat, accessories to match . . . the Tupperware box* . . . Will ran his hands over his face, as he noticed a subtle loss of muscle. The largest card upon the windowsill was seemingly created by hand, with a drawn image of Winston across the paper, and just the sight alone brought a smile across his lips. He frowned only when he realised the connotations, which led to him looking back to Beverly to ask calmly:

“And you think it could be Hannibal Lecter?”

“Don’t you, Will?”

He lifted his hands, letting his gaze move over the skin. The bruises left by needles were clear, while his skin looked ever paler against Beverly’s darker hue, and most notable were the lack of wounds or scars or broken bones. He closed his eyes . . . the clock ticked back . . . *sound of footsteps, a commotion behind him . . . turning to see Tobias astride Hannibal . . . blood* . . . it would have been all too easy for Tobias to kill him. The strings would have been around his neck before he found sense enough to retaliate, and yet Hannibal saved him. He whispered:

“I could have *died* that night.”

“I’m not sure about that,” said Beverly. “He was watching the house, Will! I mean, Budge never used any firearms that we know about, and Hannibal came at Budge from behind . . .

there's also the fact that *you* had a gun, and he would've known that. You're also assuming that he cared about the risk to your life, too. If I'm right that he's a psychopath, why'd he care about the risk?"

"According to you, he cares enough to set everything up to keep me close."

"Oh, yeah, cared enough to *trap* you into a relationship . . ."

Beverly let go of his hand. He watched as she paced the length of the bed, before seemingly growing tired of pointless distraction, and soon she was pouring out a fresh glass of water, as well as reading various medical notes and tucking him into his bed. He caught her hand as she tried to bring over some food. Beverly stopped. The way she refused to look at him was rather telling, but enough for his heart to race again. He noted how she pressed her lips and eyes into a thin line, while throwing back her head, and soon the hissed words tumbled from her mouth:

"He's – He's pregnant, Will."

"He's *what*?"

Will tried to stand. *Pain*. It seeped into his joints, mingling with the grogginess, and – at risk of a nasty fall – Beverly darted back to his side, where she guided him under the sheets. He rolled his head. He murmured a vague complaint. The heart monitor increased little by little, until he grew afraid of the sound . . . afraid of what might come . . . he panted, as he pressed a hand to his chest, and stared at her with wide eyes, even as she refused to look at him. He licked at his lips. Tears pricked afresh, while he let loose a broken laugh. He asked in a rush of breath:

"Run that by me again?"

"It's only a few weeks," muttered Beverly. "He thought maybe he'd miscarried when he was kicked to the stomach, but – I'm not much good with omega anatomy – apparently he just about managed to keep the foetus, though. He's been told to take it easy with his mature age, and I think they'll need to monitor the foetus more carefully and run a few extra tests, but . . ."

"I'm going to be a father? I'm having a baby?"

"Yeah, but . . . I don't know . . . that's what makes me more suspicious, Will!"

"Why? Because he's choosing to keep a child of rape?" Will winced. "If anything, doesn't that make him more brave? I mean . . . wait . . . *is* he keeping the baby? I – I don't even know how to feel. I don't know how to feel and – and –! How – *How* – does this make him suspicious?"

"It makes it suspicious as he's told everyone it's from a one-night stand!"

Beverly spun around to face Will. The pleading expression was a far cry from her stoicism, while her hands came up at her sides in a gesture of helplessness, and soon she was at the

foot of the bed, with her hands pressed to the cold metal rail. He furrowed his brow. He opened his mouth, but no sound came out. The sheets were soft and smooth under his hands, until he clenched his fists around them and untucked the fabric in the process, and soon Will found strength that was previously missing in his limbs. He locked eyes with Beverly with a previously lacking clarity.

"What's he's saying? That he consented to sex?"

"Yeah, he's saying you willing slept together in your rut and his heat." Beverly sighed. "I asked him about it, but he just said it was to protect you! I mean . . . it'd be a scandal, sure, but would anyone really hate you forever over something you did when you were literally like out of your mind? It's not as though *I* could say anything either, because how could I?

"You told me – again – out of your mind . . . you were also unconscious, too. I could have claimed Bedelia knew all about it, but I wasn't stupid to make that claim without checking with her first, and – guess what? – she's calling patient-doctor confidentiality, and as for Abigail being a witness to the before and after -? She's conveniently gone. I just have to ask *why* he would want you – *and only you* – to believe it was a fucking rape!"

"I – I don't –"

"You said it yourself that your memories don't match what he claims. Just – Just think about it for two seconds, okay? He not only traps you into a relationship with a baby, with the whole world in wondrous support for the little 'miracle', but he gets to force you to stay out of sheer guilt, as you spend a lifetime trying to undo the damage of the 'permanent reminder' of your so-called betrayal. It's like the ultimate manipulation. It's all just . . . it's too convenient."

Beverly returned to pacing the room. A hand remained on her hip, while the other gesticulated in the air to some unknown thought, and her shadows grew shorter with the lapsing time, while her head lowered to stare at some unfixed spot upon the tiled floor. Will fought for breath. He fought to reconcile the man that visited him every day to the man that set him up . . . the man that could have watched him die . . . *Abigail, Tobias* . . . *a baby* . . . Will brought trembling hands to his mouth. He tented them to take in deep breaths, as he choked out in a rush:

"This is too much to process right now, Bev."

"I can give you time," said Beverly.

A cold laugh broke from his throat. He could barely recognise his voice, as he stared coldly at her until she was forced to look away. The tears pricked once more at his eyes, while he pushed himself upright in bed and sat forward with the cushions behind, and – with a few hissed breaths – he counted to ten before letting loose a heavy sigh. He turned to face the windowsill. The card left by Abigail was still there, although now hidden behind new cards . . . students, colleagues . . . Will lightly punched at the mattress in a quick rhythm. It matched the beat of his heart.

"Assume you're right," said Will. "What then?"

“I think – I think Hannibal started the Jigsaw Killer to get your attention.” Beverly shrugged. “It’d add up to the Copycat Killer, too, as remember that kill during the Minnesota Shrike killings? Remember how the Copycat Killer conveniently started back up? It’s like he couldn’t stand the idea of your attention being on someone else. First the Shrike, then the Ripper . . .”

“So he created the Jigsaw Killer in competition with the Ripper –”

“To win back your attention, yeah.”

“I – I don’t know what you expect me to do, Beverly. We have no evidence for *any* of this . . . we have no evidence he raped me, no evidence he’s the Copycat, and no evidence he’s the Jigsaw Killer, either . . . all we know is he’s pregnant and a potential suspect.”

“I guess all we can do is pretend that we know nothing and . . . wait. I want to search his home at some point, but now it’s your home, too -? I don’t know. I doubt he’d leave any evidence lying about, not when there’s a chance you can stumble onto it, and he’s nearly finished dumping victim number six, which means . . . which means he might ever take a kill again . . .”

Will fought back the tears. They soon spilled down his cheeks, bitter on his lips, as he let loose choked sobs that wracked his chest, and – bringing his legs up to his chest – the weakness in his muscles was realised once again . . . emotionally, physically . . . he was at the mercy of others, while everything was taken from him piece by piece. He pressed the base of his palms against his eyes, until he saw a burst of colour across his vision. Beverly stayed at a distance. He soon wiped at his cheeks and mouth and nose, as she handed him a tissue.

“I’m sorry, Will,” said Beverly.

“No, you’re telling me that Hannibal may be a *serial killer*,” said Will. “You’re telling me that he may have raped me and impregnated himself, and that . . . that . . . that if he is the Jigsaw Killer, he may have killed not only Miriam, but . . . he may have killed Abigail, too . . .”

“Will, I really didn’t –”

“Abigail was like a daughter to me . . . *to us* . . . how am I supposed to forgive that? I can’t even get fucking even with him because he’s carrying my child! What’s even the law with capital punishment and pregnant people? Do I just lose the baby, too? Or is my baby going to be born in jail without its other father? And then . . . then how can I reconcile the fact that I – I – I think I love him on some level . . . that I fell fucking in love with a murderer!”

“I mean . . . I don’t know, Will. We don’t get to choose who we fall in love with, and I wouldn’t do anything without your permission, but . . . but let me investigate, okay? You just – You just sit on this until we can work out a way to know for certain. If he is who I think he is then there’s always time for revenge once the baby’s born, right? The Jigsaw Killer is done, after all.”

“Abigail needs – *deserves* – justice.”

“She’ll get it,” swore Beverly.

“But what happens if he’s *not* the Jigsaw Killer?” Will winced. “What happens if he’s innocent and I suspected him? I don’t know how he’d forgive me, or how I’d forgive myself, but more than that . . . why doesn’t this scare me more? I believe you, but . . . I – I’m not scared of him.”

Beverly opened her mouth, but a loud knock came at the door. They turned. The door opened slowly to reveal Hannibal in casual attire; he struggled to close the door with his foot, due to the weight of a basket filled with various toiletries and treats, all of an expensive type. He nearly dropped the gift-set on sight of Will awake. The items trembled, while the film rustled. Hannibal stared with wide eyes for a brief few seconds, before he rushed to slid the gift-set onto the tabletop, and practically sprinted to Will’s bedside. He sat on the edge of the mattress.

A rough hand came out to push away a lock of brown hair. Will instinctively leaned into the soft touch, letting out a soft sigh, and his eyes met those of Hannibal . . . soft and half-lidded eyes, filled with a film of unshed tears . . . they were hardly the eyes of a killer. The words spilling out of his mouth were so soft and low that Will failed to pick up the language, but he knew enough . . . heard enough . . . he barely noticed as Beverly made her way to the door. He did a quick double-take and made to call to her, but she cut him off with a feigned cheerful:

“Just think about it, okay, Will?”

Beverly quickly grabbed her coat, before slipping out into the corridor. Will made to follow after her, but a firm pair of hands came to press on his shoulders, where they eased him back into a reclining position and lowered the mattress to a flatter position. Hannibal quickly fussed about with the medical notes, before pressing the call-button for the nurse. He immediately pulled up a chair, while touching at Will’s face and hands and whispering various words, before asking:

“What was that about, Will?”

Will forced a smile, as he lied: “Nothing . . .”

Chapter 17

The fireplace in the foyer crackled.

A few flames licked at the logs, while they cast long shadows about the floor. The ‘yesterday’ before entering hospital was long gone, with three weeks added onto the two of memory, and there was something eerie about seeing the changes in the month since his first seizure. There were no boxes. There was no extra coat. He could hear no music played slightly too loud, or the familiar laughter as a feminine voice responded to an old joke . . . there was only them . . .

Hannibal stood in the doorway. He wore his hair loose, without product, so that the blond lock of fringe fell about his face and obstructed his eyesight, and the woollen sweater was devoid of the usual shirt beneath or other accessories. The sight of him so casual – *feet in slippers, hands around a mug of cocoa* – was so domestic that it forced a smile to Will. Even after all that transpired, he was still able to appear in his most natural state in Will’s presence. Hannibal leaned against the doorframe, as Will closed the door behind him, and whispered:

“It is good to have you home, Will.”

Will flinched. He looked again to Hannibal, who bore an expression that sent something stirring within Will . . . something deep and primal . . . the eyes were half-lidded, with head cast low and shoulders relaxed, and the smile deepened the lines of age about his expression. Will shrugged off his coat and hung it on the rack, before he kicked his shoes off at the door. A raised eyebrow was the only reaction from Hannibal. Will shrugged. He walked slowly towards Hannibal, with the small slapping sound of footsteps on tile, as Hannibal chirped out:

“I would have come to collect you from hospital.”

“It’s fine,” muttered Will. “I wanted an excuse to drive. I spent the last two weeks cooped up in a hospital room . . . physiotherapy, dietary planning, cognitive therapy . . . you have no idea how claustrophobic it gets to be poked and prodded, and the therapy -? To have some stranger fumbling around in there like a thief in the night, opening drawers and doors . . . it’s violating.”

“I assume you found no benefit to the therapeutic sessions?”

“I’ve been to enough, and studied enough, to know how they work.” Will huffed. “I managed to get the counsellor to talk to me about her phobias; think she thought that by opening up to me that I’d trust her and tell her about mine . . . she spent the hour talking about cows! After a few sessions, I’m pretty sure her fear was actually improving. I bought her a cow key-ring online. It was about then that she called me uncooperative, declared me sane, and refused to see me again.”

“That hardly seems productive, Will,” chided Hannibal.

“You try being psychoanalysed by someone who’s never experienced a death in the family, who’s never been so sick that they doubted their own sanity, or that hasn’t so much as *held* a gun, let alone had to goddamned *shoot* a man to death. I’m not opening up with my deepest secrets to some child that probably couldn’t even legally buy a beer at a bar!”

The last word was loud. The steadily increasing volume reached its crescendo, where it brought a small wince from Hannibal and reverberated from the walls of the foyer, and – in response – a loud bark followed, as if calling out to a long-time friend. Will laughed. It was a quick burst, but soon followed by long peals and barely restrained sobs. He dropped to a crouching position, as a familiar blondish-brown ball of fur raced in his direction, and soon it dived at him with yelps and cries and pants, until it knocked him flat on his back. Will laughed and cried at once.

Winston licked at his face and hands, while his tail wagged endlessly, and Will could only choke out the usual higher-pitched words of *‘who’s a good boy’* and *‘good boy, good doggy’*, as he play-fought with his closest friend, and finally he got the dog on his back. He rubbed vigorously at the fur on his stomach, until Winston rolled away and pranced about his legs. Will stood with some difficulty, as Winston refused to break physical contact with him, and Hannibal teased:

“I trust that your complaints are a sign that normality has returned?”

A low whistle fell from Hannibal’s soft lips. Winston yipped, before he ran around Will one last time, before running through to the living room, and – as Will followed – he noticed an exquisite dog-bed laid out beneath the harpsichord, where Winston obediently laid down and rested. The small space would almost be missed, unless one knew where to look, but it was filled with various dog toys and pillows, with Winston looking more relaxed than Will ever remembered.

He made a mental note to spend time with Winston come morning. He darted back to the foyer, but there was only the flickering flames and patters of rain against the windowpane, and the strange absence was something that – for a brief few heartbeats – made his stomach roll into his throat, as he tasted bile and undigested food. He caught his breath. He closed his eyes. It took time for him to hear the clatter from the kitchen, at which point the heartbeats slowed and his stomach settled, and quickly he darted down the hallway towards the kitchen.

Hannibal stood at the stove. The kettle on the ring started to boil, as he prepared an infusion of herbs and tealeaves into the teapot just beside, and Will came to stand beside him, where he leaned down on the counter with most of his weight. He said nothing, even as the teapot was filled silently beside him. It was only when a cup of sweetly scented liquid was slid his way that he stirred, and Will wrapped his hands around the hot ceramic, as he whispered:

“I don’t know what’s normal anymore, Hannibal.”

“Is there a reason behind such conflict?”

“Well, I did just spend two weeks in a coma,” muttered Will. “Oh, let’s not forget the week in a coma before that. The one day in between that I was awake -? I found out my surrogate daughter is probably fucking *dead* and was told in no uncertain terms: ‘hey, that guy you

raped while out of your mind? He's pregnant. Congratulations'! So, yeah, I'm a little 'conflicted'."

Will stared down at the murky liquid. The steam rose upward, where it caught at his senses and helped to relax his muscles, and yet – as the small whirlpool stilled on its surface – Will fought back memories of the last time he took tea in that kitchen . . . *gossip and laughter, the popping of bubble-wrap, and boxes sliding by a yapping Winston* . . . Will screwed shut his eyes, while hot tears pricked at the corners. Hannibal poured another cup of tea, before walking to the island to take a seat on a tall stool. Will almost missed the gentle observation uttered:

"You still lash out when you are afraid, I notice."

A low hum was the only response. Will took the cup in hand, as he swirled the contents and brought the whirlpool at its centre back to life, before he walked around the island and sat opposite Hannibal, who – with a smile – slid a plate between them. It was filled with homemade cookies, much like Will half-remembered his father baking as a child. The scent was still strong. He reached out a hand to pull at the corner of one . . . *still warm* . . . Will smiled, as he brought it to his mouth – paused – and took a tentative nibble on the edge. It was perfectly sweet.

"Sorry," muttered Will. "I shouldn't take it out on you."

"No, you should not."

"It's just -!" Will slumped forward. "I was so happy when we first moved in together, you know? I never thought I'd ever have a family, but there we were . . . you, me, and Abigail . . . I even thought maybe – for the first time – we *could* have a child together. I figured it'd be hard; alphas tend not to be able to carry at my age, and omega fertility drops off at yours, but . . ."

"You had dreams. You had hope," said Hannibal. "There is still hope, Will."

"Is there? They just discharged me from hospital. I'm supposed to be attending therapy, booking in my post-care appointments . . . maybe using my sabbatical from work to sneak in a few extra fishing weekends . . . not only is this *not* how I pictured my life, but it's not even how I pictured my recovery! I'm worrying. I'm worrying about finding Abigail, about whether I'm going to be a good father, and how you're -?" Will winced. "How you're coping . . ."

"How I'm coping with what?"

"Don't. Don't make me say it, please."

Will lifted his gaze, as he forced a half-smile. The hand around the cup tightened, to the point that his palm turned white from the boiling temperatures within, and the cookie in his other hand crumbled to a flat point where his fingers met in the middle. He swallowed hard. Hannibal watched him with such an impassive expression, that he seemed almost statuesque in the low lights of the kitchen, and Will struggled to school his expression in response. The

pursing of his lips barely masked the visible tremble, while his voice croaked as he choked out:

“I *raped* you, Hannibal. This child is a product of *rape*.”

Hannibal hummed. He sipped at his drink. There was a slight furrow to his brow, but the cup seemed to hide the twinge of a smile, and Will – sitting back, rubbing at his nose and eyes – struggle to make sense of the conflicted signals and contradicting signs. Hannibal soon put down the cup with a soft click of ceramic on the saucer, and he bore a smile that brought a twinkle to his eyes, as he nodded slowly toward Will. A phone rang somewhere in the distance, while a clock chimed from within the hallway, and Hannibal broke through the quiet with a clear:

“I prefer to think of this as proof good may come from bad.”

“Do you want to run that by me again?”

“I like to think that perhaps this was fate,” said Hannibal. “After all, if we had waited several more years to both be ready, it is very possible that we would both be unable to carry a child due to our dynamics and advanced ages. It also ties us together. Do you not think this a blessing? I will forever be a part of you, Will, and you a part of me. We cannot leave one another, not entirely, as we will forever be connected by the life that we created.

“Is it not the same insofar as your illness? You were at risk, but you also had your mind expanded past its horizons, culminating in your destruction of the Chesapeake Ripper. It is one distraction less in your life, correct? You no longer have the shadow of Hobbs or Budge in your life, but instead you have been . . . freed. It enables us to be together and to focus on each other.”

“We would have been together anyway,” muttered Will.

“Would we?” Hannibal smiled. “We are very different, Will. You were struggling with your sexual identity, still firmly classifying yourself as ‘straight’, and you also fought with your own mind and neurodivergent tendencies. You were at war with yourself. You were distracted by the Chesapeake Ripper. Now we have no distractions, as now you know yourself.”

“And who am I?”

“You are Will Graham; alpha, partner, father –”

“And killer?”

Hannibal smiled, as he said: “Yes, even that.”

Will dropped his head again. The tea no longer tasted sweet, as he fought the bitter aftertaste. It clung and cloyed on his tongue, like a thick and unshakeable powder, and he slid the saucer to the centre of the table, where its edges clattered against the plate of treats. Hannibal slowly slid from his stool, as he swept around the island. He let his fingers brush against marble. The movement stopped as he came behind Will, looming over him with a dark shadow, and

pressed his hands onto shoulders so tense that they brought with them pain. He leaned close to whisper:

“May I show you what I hope to be the nursery?”

“Sure,” mumbled Will. “I guess.”

Hannibal stepped back, allowing Will space to stand. A soft hand took the crook of his arm, before gently leading him back into the long hallway, and soon he was guided up the staircase, where he traced a familiar path to the bedrooms. They past by several open doors, but one remained closed . . . locked even . . . silence lay beyond, but if he closed his eyes – if he concentrated hard enough – he could almost fool himself into hearing her soft voice.

They finally entered the nursery. It was empty save for a lone table laden with paint, while a mural decorated the wall around the large bay windows, and the others waited to be painted with various colours and designs that would bring it fully to life. The mural was beautiful; it depicted a long river that seemed to flow from the edges of the room towards the window, with an interesting perspective that led the window to become the focal piece, and the trees outside bled into the depictions of the trees along the sides of the river. Will put a hand over his mouth.

“I – I like it,” whispered Will. “I like it a lot.”

“I thought you might appreciate a mural of nature.”

“I do, but . . . why are you so excited?” Will sighed. “I hate to keep bringing things back to the same point, like a broken record, but can you really forget the fact that I *raped* you? Shouldn’t this be a lot more traumatic? You’ve been violated. *I* violated you. Why would you want a constant reminder of that in your life? How are you so fucking *calm*?”

A heavy exhale caused Hannibal’s nostrils to flare. He walked away from Will at last, where he stood before the large and airy windows, and gently took away the newspapers that protected the windowsills from paint damage. Once the papers were piled neatly, Hannibal sat on the edge of the sill and patted a spot beside him. Will raised an eyebrow. It took a whispered *‘please’* for him to follow and sit beside Hannibal, albeit with some space between them, as neither dared to touch the other. The nursery was dark, even as the light above swung without a lampshade.

“It is as I said, Will. I choose to see this child as a blessing.” Hannibal smiled. “They did not have a choice in how they were conceived, and – even though they may just be a mass of cells – to me they are something more . . . they are a symbol of our potential. They are a result of our union, as well as a part of us both. Why dwell on the pain when you can revel in the happiness?”

“That’s all well and good, but then why *lie* to people? You told everyone we had a one-night stand, like you weren’t brutally violated . . . that’s not like you. You’re calm and cool, sure, but when have you every just stood by and took an insult, let alone a goddamned rape?”

“I love you dearly, Will. I cannot blame you for what was not your fault.”

“It doesn’t matter if it was my fault or not, because it’s still traumatic! You’re still entitled to feel hurt or scared or violated, even if I was out of my mind when it happened . . . what is it with you and trauma? Alana told me you went back to work three days after Budge was killed. I don’t know what your secret is, but I wish you’d share . . . I hate myself for what I did to you.”

“Do not blame yourself. I am as much to blame, I am sure.”

“How are *you* to blame?”

A smile broke over Hannibal. He reached out with a hand to touch on Will’s thigh. The muscle in his leg tensed, as Will took in a sharp inhalation, and – as his nostrils flared and eyes watered – he ran his eyes slowly from the feet of Hannibal up to his face. The smile was at great odds with the frown in response, and Will took deep and slow breaths to fight down the swell of nausea that threatened to break free from his throat. The bitter and burning acid pricked at his tongue, while he thought back to Beverly . . . to Abigail . . . to the very beginning . . .

“I should have been more aware of your rut,” said Hannibal.

“That seems like the same logic that blames women for wearing short skirts.”

“No, it is merely the logic that says you were deep in a rut, mentally ill, and placed in a situation in which you were alone with an omega you could easily overpower. I did not anticipate you to show more trauma than myself from these events, but I suppose it makes sense when everyone processes these things differently. Just remember, Will: you are not alone.”

“Beverly – Beverly is concerned that you’re not . . . I don’t know . . . ‘processing’ things in a healthy way? I think I agree with her . . . I think I can understand why she’d be worried, when it’s almost like you’re repressing everything . . . like it never happened . . .”

Will bit into his lip. He turned his head towards the paints, where a few brief sketches seemed to go off the paper and onto the white cloth that protected the floor, and even the newspaper sheets were covered in various scrawled words and measurements. Hannibal was busy. Will noted that the hand on his leg tightened, something between possession and protection, and the knee beside him moved until it touched against him with a light brush. The beating in his chest increased, as he let his head roll on his shoulders and stared aimlessly with double-vision upward.

“I still see Abigail,” said Will. “I hear her whisper to me at night. I don’t think she’ll be at rest until I find the Jigsaw Killer . . . the Copycat Killer . . . but he’s only got one more body left to dump, before he’s done, and there’s no guarantee we’ll even be able to catch him.”

“A sophisticated psychopath,” added Hannibal.

“Do you know the worst thing? I’m not even sure I *want* to catch him. If it means I stop seeing her, then I’d rather him go uncaught . . . I won’t have to say goodbye, I won’t have to lose her . . . I don’t feel alone when I feel her with me. I know it’s only a matter of time

before they take me off the case, but I don't know . . . maybe I'm just tired, but everything right now -?"

Will moved his hand to the one on his thigh. He paused. There was an inch of space between his hand and the one below at the most, but it took several seconds before he slowly made contact, and allowed his fingers to entwine with the ones against his worn jeans. They remained sat beside one another in silence, as Will continued to stare with an unfocused gaze at an unfixed spot, and he barely noticed as Hannibal slid from the windowsill to come before him. A firm grip took his chin and forced his eyes downward. Hannibal smiled and said calmly:

"You need to rest, Will."

The fingers slid down his neck, before tracing a long line down his arm. It finally stopped at his wrist, where it took his hand with a light hold, and – with a chuckle – a lingering kiss was pressed to the rough skin, before finally Hannibal stepped away from the window. He stood directly beneath the harsh light, so that it cast cold shadows about his face and body, and Will found his eyes moving to the stomach . . . at just over a month, there was barely anything to see, and yet he could almost fool himself into seeing a visible well. Will choked out:

"You really forgive me for what I did?"

"There's nothing to forgive, Will."

Hannibal whispered a brief: *'get some sleep, Will'*. He turned towards the door and left with promises to speak again come morning, before disappearing into the hallway, and soon the opening and closing of a bedroom door cemented the end of the conversation. Will laughed. It was a low and hollow sound, one that went on and on and on, until it was stopped by tears and retches and gasps for oxygen. The words 'there's nothing to forgive' ran through his mind, as one thought consumed Will to the point of madness:

That's what I was afraid of . . .

Chapter 18

Chapter Notes

Trigger Warning: mildly dubious consent

"Oh, you've got to be -!"

Will took off his glasses. A faint imprint was left upon his nose, as he rubbed lightly at the smooth and sweaty skin, and – with a grunt – tossed the frames onto the bedside table. He dropped his head against the leather headboard, while he took in low hisses of breath. The computer tablet rested against his bare legs, as the glow from the screen stung at his eyes, and a cold chill ran over him, as he sat against the sheets barely clothed in the night.

The clock ticked by the seconds, as he waited for his heartbeat to slow. He clenched his teeth until his jaw ached, while the photograph of himself stared at him under a familiar banner, and the caption questioned his sanity and health. The headline read: *'Graham Taken off Case'*. Will lowered his gaze and skimmed over various words . . . *'potential suspect', 'induced coma', 'six weeks'* . . . Will bit into his cheek, where he gnawed at the flesh, but it did little to ground him and only added to the mixture of emotion. He gripped the edges of the black plastic.

He held tight enough that colours spilled onto the screen, threatening to crack or permanently blur under the pressure, and – with a curse – he loosened his grip and swung his feet onto the floor, before throwing his body upright. The quickening of his heart returned, while his eyes narrowed until all he could see was the screen. He held the tablet loose at his side. It trembled with an irregular pattern, until he marched out of the bedroom to the hallway, and strode towards the master bedroom. It was a path made all too familiar in his weeks since release.

Will stopped as he reached the brick archway that surrounded the door. The marble tiles were spotless inside, while the bed looked so pristine that it was clearly unused, and the nearest door – on the left side of the bed – was opened to reveal the closest. Will strode towards it. He kicked open the door. It was empty inside. He cursed and marched towards the leather chairs by the fireplace, before he finally noticed the steam from the *en suite* at the right-side door. Will called:

"Have you read this?"

The *en suite* door opened. Will opened his mouth to ask further questions, until he caught sight of Hannibal standing in the doorway. He fell silent. The racing of his heart increased, as his mouth watered and eyes widened, and his grip on the tablet loosened, until – with a loud *'shit'* – he was forced to fumble to keep from it dropped onto the floor. Hannibal chuckled, as a burst of steam flooded out from behind him, and enshrouded him like his personal aura.

He wore only a towel. The slight hair that led a trail from belly button to hem was almost an invitation to move ones eye-line lower, and his wet hair was bushed back slick to his scalp, further emphasising the sharp cheekbones and jaw-line. A slight swell to his stomach marked the eighth week to the pregnancy, almost subtle enough to be missed beneath a suit, and yet noticeable when only the barest of fabrics kept his modesty only, if that. There was a flush to his skin from the heat of the shower, as he looked Will over and asked with a smirk:

"What have I read, Will?"

Will slid into the leather chair. He crossed his legs, which drew a chuckle from Hannibal, and placed the tablet on the table, before spinning it around to face the chair opposite. Hannibal strode across the bedroom, after which he took a seat and folded his legs in turn. The short length of the towel brought a deep blush to Will, who averted his eyes and found a newfound interest in a decorative statue of a monk nearby, while Hannibal reached out and pulled the tablet towards him. A low hum escaped his lips, as his hazel eyes ran slowly over the screen.

"Ah, an article by Ms Lounds," said Hannibal.

"I'm still *technically* on sabbatical," mumbled Will. "I don't even know how she heard! It's been – what – around four weeks since my discharge, six since I woke from the coma? I mean . . . okay, it's not like I was *expecting* to just be let back into the investigation, but I wasn't expecting to find out that I'd been let go quite like this. I find out from a fucking *tabloid*?"

"Jack did not tell you?"

"No, Jack didn't tell me! Jack didn't tell me shit!"

Will threw himself back against the low-backed seat. He ran his hands over his face, pulling at the skin and letting out a low groan, until – finally – they fell down limp onto his thighs. He stretched and spread his legs, while he gazed upward at the ceiling. It exposed the length of his throat. The words echoed back again in his mind . . . *'Jack did not tell you'* . . . the tone of which was said in a low voice, only with a slight inflection on the final word. Will tilted his head. He looked back again to Hannibal, but this time with narrowed eyes and a cold stare.

"Why?" Will spat. "What did he tell *you*?"

A low sigh fell from Hannibal. He spun the tablet back around to Will, before he took a hold of the knot on the towel, and – with careful balance – he stood and came around the table, until he stood behind Will and dropped his hands onto tense shoulders. Will hissed. He tried to maintain the tension, but it was soon forced out of his muscles by deft hands. The long fingers took a firm hold of him, while the soft thumbs dug into his knots with perfect pressure, and soon the hisses and scoffs turned into a low groan. Will half-closed his eyes. He sagged in his seat.

"I only spoke to him in passing, Will," whispered Hannibal. "I invited Jack and Bella to a meal this Thursday, so you may ask him in person then, but - rest assured – I am sure that Jack will be quick to plug any leak that is found . . . Freddie Lounds will soon lack for news.

The Jigsaw Killer will drop his final victim once he feels ready, and that shall be the end of his story."

"Yeah, but it won't be the end of *mine*." Will sighed. "It won't be the end of Abigail's either. It won't even mean that the Copycat Killer will stop, and if they do -? It's just loose ends, unanswered questions, and a lack of closure. Jack knows I need to be on the case."

"Jack is merely doing what is best to keep you from breaking."

"Don't," said Will. "Don't beat around the bush. Tell me what Jack *said*."

"I fail to see why it matters –"

"What did Jack *say* to you, Hannibal? I need to know!"

A soft pair of lips pressed themselves to his neck. It was a gesture that grew more and more frequent in recent days, as well as more and more lingering, but this time was different to the last, as Hannibal not only lingered . . . he kissed again . . . and again. A shiver ran through Will, as he instinctively tilted his head to allow for more access. The hands continued to knead at his shoulders, while the lips explored every inch of skin available, and – as Will opened his mouth to ask again for an answer – Hannibal cut him off by whispering into his ear:

"He said that he believes this is not good for you."

"Was it ever good for me?"

"Alana advises you are in no place of mind to act as an investigator," said Hannibal. "I believe that Beverly has also stated that it best you have an extended break, and – while strictly 'sane' – I have been told not a single psychiatrist yet has been willing to sign you off as ready for work. I also believe Jack blames himself for your state of mind . . . of how close you came to death."

"I won't give up on the case. I know I'm close to the bottom of things."

"You have a home here, Will. You have a partner that would kill for you, and an unborn child that will depend on you, and you have friends that love you . . . Jack, Alana, Beverly . . . why not go back into teaching on an exclusive basis? Do you truly need to surround yourself with death and violence and horror? You are finally free. Do not chain yourself once more."

"You didn't see what Freddie was saying! It said, and I quote, *'it takes a killer to catch a killer, which is why it was a blessing that Will Graham was set on the path of the Chesapeake Ripper, but how can a killer be trusted to catch himself? Perhaps this is why Jack Craw-'*"

"Ms Lounds has settled out of court enough times that I am sure she –"

"Will take down the article? Jack's probably already on it . . ."

Will huffed. He made to speak again, but this time the fingers moved. They dipped underneath the hem of the oversized t-shirt, where they no longer massaged, but instead

simply explored his skin with soft strokes and teasing tickles of flesh. Will squirmed in his seat, but more so as Hannibal leaned over him to turn off the tablet. The heat from his body almost scorched his skin, while the brushed of the arm against him brought out a shuddered sigh, and – as Hannibal returned to his position – he dropped his lips back to Will's ear, as he whispered:

"In that case, you need a distraction."

Hannibal came to stand before him. The towel has loosened just enough to bare his right hipbone, and the trail of hair came to stop at a dangerous point, and – as Will stared with little subtly – Hannibal took his hand and brought it to his mouth, where he pressed a kiss to his palm. A second kiss followed to his wrist. A third to his thumb. The kisses continued, until Will was gently pulled to his feet, so that that they could continue along his arm . . . his shoulder . . . his earlobe, where they stopped over to force out the desperate words:

"This seat cannot be comfortable for you, Will."

"Sorry, I didn't mean to come into your room this late," muttered Will. "I just saw the article, and I felt so damned *angry*, and – I don't know – I just needed someone to talk to . . . you've always been that guy, Hannibal. I guess I just lose track of time and boundaries."

"I believe that there should be no boundaries between lovers."

"Is that what we are now? Lovers?"

A hand came to his waist, where it tugged him with a light pressure. He let his bare feet step from the tiles onto the expensive rug, as he walked with slow and steady steps in time with Hannibal, and he was easily led to sit down against the beige bed-runner. Will rested a hand on the bolster upon the ottoman. It was almost at the same level as the bed, albeit maybe a couple inches lower, and a part of him blushed to realise maybe that was intentional. He said nothing as Hannibal parted his legs and stood between them. He towered over Will.

"I would like us to be lovers, Will," said Hannibal.

The hands returned to his shoulders, but this time they ran lower. They slid down his sides, where they soon reached the hem of his old t-shirt, and – without hesitation – they pulled the fabric up over Will's head, before tossing it haphazardly on the floor. It let him exposed . . . the scars from past encounters and surgeries, the bad tan-line now faded from so long indoors . . . Will blushed and turned his head aside, while an arm instinctively came up to hide his chest.

Hannibal stepped back. The hint of a tongue ran over his lips, as he cast his dilated eyes slowly over Will from feet to head, and Will squirmed back – now only in his shorts – until both feet touched the edge of the mattress. Hannibal growled. It was low . . . primal . . . *sexual*. He pressed both his hands to the sheets and runner, before he crawled onto the bed. Will crawled back. The two began a strange dance, as Hannibal stalked him along the bed, until Will slipped and fell flat on his back. Hannibal knelt over him. He looked hungrily down, as Will laughed.

It was an unwanted sound, borne from various emotions. He clasped his hands over his mouth, while Hannibal's knees were on either side of his hips, and those broad hands were on either side of his head. A few locks of hair fell about Hannibal's face, as his expression shifted from hunger to annoyance. Will's face contorted into a grimace. The laughter continued, even as his lips pulled awkwardly into all shapes and sizes. Hannibal asked in a low voice:

"Is something wrong?"

"No," laughed Will. "I was just thinking . . . I was going to ask you about Abigail. I wanted to keep her room ready for when we find her, in case she's alive, and maybe make some missing posters, canvas the neighbourhood . . . it just would totally kill any arousal, though, wouldn't it?"

"And yet you mention it anyway."

"Sorry, there was just something about the intimacy of what might happen . . . the horror of what might *have* happened . . . I don't know; the two are just so opposite, aren't they? Love and hate. Life and death. I guess it just amused me that only my mind could conflate the two, put them together in some twisted way . . . I want you, but I didn't come in here *because* I want you . . ."

Hannibal used a leg to kick apart Will's thighs. He situated himself between them, with his upper body braced on his forearms on either side of Will's chest, and the towel was barely tied together, enough that Will was certain it had fallen to uncover buttocks. It existed now only as an extra barrier between his half-erect member and what felt like a full erection, one that was hard and pointed against his thigh. Hannibal dropped his head closer to Will, until noses touched and breath was shared, and asked in a husky tone and permeated about the bedroom:

"If you did not come to me because you want me, why did you come to me?"

Will spread his legs wide, before wrapping them around the slim waist. He crossed his ankles across the small of Hannibal's back, using the position to force him closer, and the pressure of that burning erection against his stirring cock was just perfect. It brought a low sigh from Will, whose eyelids fluttered and lips parted. He threw one arm around Hannibal's shoulders, while his free hand buried itself into Hannibal's still damp locks. Will choked out:

"I came to you because I *need* you."

It was no lie. He needed Hannibal . . . *emotionally, psychologically* . . . the throbbing to his cock betrayed a baser need; it was one he tried to push from his mind, even as he instinctively bucked up to rub together their clothed crotches. A few tears pricked at his eyes. He groaned low and deep, until his hands dug deep enough to pull hair against scalp, and pressed his lips lazily and haphazardly against Hannibal's, searching for something – *anything* – to make it right.

"I need you, Hannibal," whispered Will.

Will parted his lips and half-suckled at Hannibal's lip. He tentatively licked at the soft skin, before pulling away and delivering another lingering kiss to another spot, and soon – with more force and ferocity – Hannibal responded with equal suckles and kisses in turn. It continued until a hand buried itself into his hair, where it yanked back his head with a painful sting to his skin. He gasped. A tongue pushed itself into his mouth. It explored deep every inch of him.

The towel was thrown away across the room, while lips moved in time with his own, and the tongue darted in and out of his mouth to dominate the kiss, almost as if Hannibal were making love to him orally, even as his other hand worked to shove down his shorts. They barely made it past his buttocks in their current position. Hannibal cursed. He gripped at Will's ankles, as he forced them from his body, and slid into a standing position at the edge of the bed, so that he could rip away the boxers and drop them unceremoniously to the floor.

"You needed me tonight for emotional support," gasped Hannibal. "If I had failed to be clear before, I hope that I am more than clear now: I wish to make love to you, Will. I need to know that you are not merely going along with my advances out of undue pressure, or because you seek for a momentary distraction from emotional pain. I need to know that you consent to this."

"Does it matter?" Will scoffed. "You want me, don't you?"

"More than anything, Will. It is why I will not hurt you . . . I know all too well the pain a non-consensual union may bring, and we are finally making progress as a couple. I wish to make love to a willing partner, and not merely to fuck a convenient vessel. Do you want this?"

A rush of adrenaline burst through Will. He lifted himself onto his elbows. The racing of his heart brought with it a mixture of emotions . . . *vulnerability, fear, rage, betrayal* . . . every inch of skin was exposed to Hannibal, including his now erect member, and Hannibal feasted on the sight of him with a hungry appreciation. Will fought the urge to cover his body. Will bit deep into his lip, as shallow and fast pants broke from him in rapid succession.

Hannibal was handsome, almost impossibly handsome. There was a thick coating of hair across his chest, marking him in a masculine manner unlike past partners, and a long line from toned pectoral muscles down to his well-defined cock. It was a considerable length for an omega, although perhaps average for a beta or alpha, and it bore a slight curve that led to weeping tip, which leaked pre-come at an astounding rate. The length was uncircumcised, but with a fair girth and – for the first time – Will shuddered at the reality of what it would be like inside him.

He let his eyes wander over Hannibal . . . *the stag riding him despite his pleas . . . the stag chasing their daughter helplessly through the woods* . . . Will dropped back against the sheets, where he panted and writhed and screwed shut his eyes . . . *the man that made him question his sexuality . . . the friend that he loved above all else* . . . tears spilled over his cheeks. Will threw his arms over his head in a submissive manner, as he spread his legs wide.

"I want this," lied Will.

Will arched his back and mewled. He used one hand to fall upon his chest, whereby he tugged and pulled at his nipple in what he hoped was a seductive manner, and – with a jolt of his cock – electric arousal coursed through every nerve and every sinew. It was all that was needed. Hannibal descended on him. A hand slapped hard at his digits, knocking them away with a sting, and a mouth fell upon his nipple and sucked and licked and nipped in rapid succession.

A cry ripped through Will's throat.

He arched until his back felt it might snap, while throwing his legs over those shoulders, and he was almost bent in two as Hannibal flicked his tongue incredibly fast over the nipple itself, before slowly sweeping it around the areola in light circles. A few groans sent vibrations through the nub, before Hannibal switched and used his hand to stimulate the now wet area. Will lost himself, as the hand slid ever lower . . . lower . . . until it took his member . . .

Tears spilled from his eyes . . . for a split second he was in his bedroom . . . Hannibal was above him, with his wet inner walls clamping around his straining cock, and his hands clawed down Will's chest, as he flung back his head with low groans . . . *'no, not like this'* . . . Will laughed. It was a broken sound that brought him back to the present. This was Hannibal's bedroom. This was Hannibal's bed, and now Hannibal was looking up at him, with his lips still suckling at his nipple like a newborn babe in source of sustenance. Will bit his lip to stop the laughter.

Hannibal blew across the wet areola, hardening the nipple further. He kissed a long line from the chest to Will's mouth, before he took him in an all-consuming kiss, and their tongues collided for what felt like minutes, when the chiming of the clock spoke of almost an hour. Hannibal sucked at his tongue, a technique that took Will by surprise, before pulling back. He looked down at Will, before pushing back a lock of stray hair from a sweat-soaked face, and praised:

"You are beautiful, Will."

"Do you often call your alpha partners 'beautiful'?"

"I have only taken three people before you."

The mouth moved to his earlobe. It suckled and nibbled with some force, sending forth a mixture of delicious pleasure and pain in equal measure, while his cock pressed against Will's dripping member and was eased by the natural lubrication of Hannibal's pre-come. A careful blow to his ear brought shudders of arousal, as it tickled him just right, and Will blinked away the tears, as he focused on the pleasure and foreplay that his handful of previous partners failed to attain. A series of high-pitched keens escaped Will, as he found strength to choke out:

"You – You were never taken? You were serious when –"

"I have always seen relationships as a mean to an end," said Hannibal. "They served a practical purpose, and – no – there was none that I would let take me . . . a man once offered

himself to me and my partner, and I may have said 'yes' from curiosity alone, but that was as close as I came to have a man or woman inside me in some way. Only you, Will . . ."

"Don't – Don't bring that up now . . . *don't* . . ."

"Only you were special enough to pique my interest. I was fascinated by your mind, but soon I grew to desire your heart and soul . . . you were handsome, beautiful . . . so unlike any other alpha, so unlike any other man . . . I wanted to take you, own you, mark you . . ."

"I – I don't . . . you're – you're not . . . you're not l-like –"

"There is no one else I would have trusted inside me, Will."

Will opened his mouth to speak. The words in his mind were washed away with a series of incoherent sounds punctuated by desperate pleading . . . *'oh – oh god; oh god, please'* . . . tears streamed from his eyes into his hair, as he writhed and squirmed beneath Hannibal. The final sentence took time to penetrate into his mind . . . to break his senses . . . '*trusted inside me'* . . . *'trusted'* . . . Will snapped his eyes wide open. His heart stopped.

A cold sweat broke over his body, like ice water poured slowly over flesh. He struggled to sit upright on his elbows, as his mouth fumbled over a stream of sounds and words, and his hands fought for purchase against the sheets, while his legs kicked at the mattress. Hannibal chuckled into his ear: *'have I really worked you into such an insatiable state already*'. A heavy gasp dropped from Will, as Hannibal lifted him by hooking arms beneath his knees, and – with a swift spin – he was moved into a position with his head at the foot of the mattress.

Will struggled to sit upright, as he panted and licked at his lips. The arousal and horror mingled in equal measure, as he practically sobbed through a mixture of desire and repulsion, until rough hands grabbed at his waist and flipped him over. It formed enough forced to knock him just over the edge of the bed, so that his body was supported on the bolster and his forearms lay against the ottoman, and the slight height difference in furniture – seemingly nothing on a glance – forced him into the perfect position to be taken. The rear was perfectly exposed.

He parted his legs. The feeling behind was hard to endure, almost like an absence in his hole, and his cheeks flushed with colour, as he realised there was nothing that he wanted more than to be filled . . . claimed, controlled . . . *wanted*. Will lifted his head. The mirror above the fireplace was angled downward, perfectly capturing the image of the ottoman and bottom of the mattress. It showed Will on all fours, with buttocks in the air ready to be taken. He groaned out:

"You put the mirror angled like that on purpose, didn't you?"

"Perhaps," chuckled Hannibal. "Do you like it?"

Will stared into his reflection. Hannibal practically crawled over him, covering his back with a toned abdomen and strong chest, and the heat from him sent goose-bumps over his skin, until he was writhing against the flesh of his soon-to-be-lover. He watched as a hand deftly

moved beneath the bolster, where it retrieved a small bottle of lubricant . . . Will licked his lips . . . his hole twitched expectantly in anticipation of being filled and used. He squirmed.

The hot cock rubbed against his hole, while Hannibal uncapped the lubrication, and Will bucked back against the length, as its head pushed against his entrance . . . *the right size, the right shape* . . . *so close* . . . there was a loud squirt, as Hannibal coated his fingers. A fingertip came expertly to his hole, where – instead of instantly pressing for accommodation – it toyed and ran circles around the rim, coaxing it to wink and tighten and loosen, as it searched for something to fill it and something to hold onto, and very slowly did it then press inside.

It followed the natural curve of his inner walls. The finger moved slow, stopping when it seemed to meet resistance, and each undulation allowed it slowly to move to the hilt, where moved in a slow come-hither motion, until it struck something inside of him . . . something Will never knew existed within alpha men . . . he cried out. The vision in the mirror blurred. He struggled to see through stars, as he clawed at the ottoman and choked on saliva.

"I like it," gasped Will. "I like it a lot!"

A second finger pressed its way alongside the first, with a mild stretching sensation, and it slowly began a scissor-like motion along his insides, in and out with a steady rhythm, while he stared at his reflection being finger-fucked with a steady precision. A visible sweat broke over his forehead, as his hair stuck against his skin. Will swallowed hard. The third fingers slid inside with some more difficulty, bringing a small sting of displeasure, and he hissed through his teeth.

It took the better part of five or ten minutes to grow used to the thrusting sensation and fullness, while a fourth and final finger pushed inside to meet the others, and – grunting in time to his thrusts – he thoroughly fucked himself on the invading digits. He pressed his forehead against the ottoman, where he clawed and scratched at the fabric. The voice that escaped him was high-pitched and alien to him . . . *'uh, uh, oh, uh, ah'* . . . Will looked back to the mirror with unfocused eyes, as Hannibal removed his hand with an audible squelch. Will choked out:

"You sh-shouldn't need lube . . . n-not as an omega . . ."

"I have wanted this for so long, Will."

"You – You wanted me . . . you wanted me all this time . . ."

Hannibal placed his erection at Will's hole. It was difficult to see the exact point they met within the mirror, but it was far more than he would see without the gift of his erection, and he could only watch with wide eyes and open mouth as Hannibal guide it into his entrance. The feelings were nothing like ever before experienced . . . it was hot inside him, while also soft yet firm . . . it filled him almost to breaking point, before it stopped at last with balls pressed to buttocks. It took time to adjust . . . time to get used to feeling *complete* . . . the inner walls clenched around Hannibal, drawing out low grunts from the stoic man, as he gasped out:

“Do you want this, Will?”

“Yes,” gasped Will. “Yes, yes, *holy fuck*, yes!”

The member slowly slid out of his hole. It left his inner walls closing in its absence, slowly imploding in on themselves, and – just as Will was reduced to a mewling mess – it rammed hard back inside of him, cleaving him in two and filling him back to the brim. The force was incredibly, but the speed was slow . . . *he was savouring it, making it last* . . . the friction was so sweet, while balls slapped against buttocks. The lubrication squelched and leaked out of his hole, where it coated the cheeks alongside his crack, and dripped down his thighs.

It started a steady rhythm, while a hand sneaked its way beneath him. It took a hold of his cock. Will threw back his head, as he stared the reflection of Hannibal behind him, where its hand milked his weeping erection for all it was worth, and his mussed hair fell about his face, as his throat released growls and groans that sent shivers down Will’s spine. Will watched as Hannibal jerked his member in time to the thrust . . . making love to him . . . fucking him . . .

The reflection changed.

The white skin started to turn an inky black. It started at the fingers visible on Will’s waist, along with the cock each time it slid from his hole, and soon it was spreading . . . like blotting paper dipped into spilled ink . . . it ran along arms, shoulders, neck . . . it consumed his face and eyes . . . soon he was an opaque shadow in a well-lit bedroom. A pair of large antlers broke from the smooth skull. They extended out like reaching hands, filling the entire glass in the frame . . .

Will cried out . . . *a broken sound between a scream and a groan* . . . he scrambled to get away, as the stag-man picked up speed and pounding into him with relentless force, enough that his prostate was brushed with every trust. Will screamed. He sobbed. The pleasure was immense, building . . . *building* . . . reaching its inevitable crescendo, as every nerve was lit aflame and every inch of skin tingled with a furious heat. The adrenaline struck again, mingling with the endorphins, until fear and desire were one and the same . . . he shook his head . . . he pounded the ottoman . . . saliva spilled from his lips, as his cock twitched in Hannibal’s hand . . .

He half-shut his eyes, but – on opening them – the stag-man was retreating . . . black became white, antlers became hair, and yet the eyes -! The eyes were the same. They were a piercing black that matched his gaze in the mirror, and – each time he choked on his screams – Hannibal smiled and aimed all the harder for his prostate. Will would come. He would come looking into those black eyes, while Hannibal mistook terror for lust, and all but crooned:

“You’re so beautiful when unrestrained, Will . . .”

“*I – I can’t – it’s – it’s too much* . . .”

“That’s it, my love. Let it go . . . free yourself.”

It was stirring inside him . . . a tingling and prickling sensation . . . he writhed and begged and cried, as his inner walls clenched and fluttered around that invading cock. He choked and

spluttered, as tears ran down his face, and still he bucked . . . *still he bucked* . . . as he practically pounded back in a desperate desire for more . . . *'more'* . . . *'more, more, more!'* . . . the hand around his erection picked up speed, with the thumb dipping into the slit. Will licked at his lips, as he closed his eyes and relished in the overwhelming bliss that filled him from head to toe.

"Hannibal," gasped Will. "*Hannibal*!"

The pleasure reached its peak. A burst of come shot from his cock, as his inner walls clamped down hard around the hard cock inside, and his vision blurred as sparks of colour blasted across his vision, while every muscle in his body tensed to the point of pain. He choked on the air itself, as all breath left him in one fell swoop. The ropes of come soaked the sheets and coated his stomach, until they finally dribbled out down Hannibal's fingers, and Will felt the beautiful afterglow slowly fight away the orgasm that defied all else in his lifetime.

A red-hot heat filled him from the inside, something that reminded him of an enema, bringing a childish chuckle from him, as his body fell limp and lifeless against the bolster and ottoman, and only the firm grip upon his waist kept him partially upright. Hannibal was quiet as he came. A soft grunt was the only thing that betrayed his orgasm, as so much come pumped inside Will that it threatened to spill out as that cock slowly started to deflate inside him.

The cock slowly slipped out from him, drawing a harsh hiss from Will. It was sore inside. It served as a reminder that he had been filled . . . *used* . . . the come trickled out of his hole, as Hannibal collapsed down beside him, dragging Will with him against the sweat-soaked sheets. Will lay sprawled against Hannibal, as their legs entwined and breaths mingled. He rested his head against the still heaving chest. The heart within raced. They spent time basking in each other's presence and the afterglow, while Hannibal stroked lightly at his upper arm.

"I – I've never been taken before," mumbled Will.

"I am honoured to be your first."

"I feel . . . I feel full . . . like I can't explain it." Will chuckled. "I feel it physically, like I'm *supposed* to have you inside me . . . the stretch, the hold . . . I also – I also missed that connection, like of just *being* with someone . . . usually that feeling ends when the act ends, but I still feel close with you, like you're still a part of me, and yet . . . I don't know . . ."

"Finish the thought, Will."

"I guess it scares me . . . *I'm afraid*. I saw you in the mirror, and it should have been hot . . . should have been hot to see you taking me like that . . . knowing you had that power, but that you'd never hurt me . . . never use it against me . . . instead, I felt like I was seeing you – the *real* you – like the mask was falling away . . . I'm scared, Hannibal. I'm scared to say it aloud, because then I'll have to confront it. I don't want to confront it. I just want *you*."

Hannibal said nothing. He simply pressed a light kiss to Will's head, as he slipped away from his light hold, and swung himself around so that his feet pressed against the floor. Will

stretched out, while letting his hands and legs brush against the sheets. He barely paid mind to the sounds around him, even as Hannibal pulled on a silk robe and tied it to hide his modest, and he simply basked in how his hole clenched and leaked, while fixing his attention on the come that slowly dried against his skin. A low question barely broke though his senses, as Hannibal asked:

"How about I make us some tea, Will?"

Will nodded.

He waited until the footsteps padded away. It took all his strength to crawl to the head of the bed, where his rear ached with a strange sensation on each move . . . it was a slight sting, like something scratching at him from inside, like a reminder of what was once filling him to the brim, and yet it was a reminder of the pleasure . . . Will smiled. He curled up beneath the sheets, despite the come and sweat and saliva that coated his body, and nearly found himself lulled into a peaceful sleep, until the bedroom door clicked closed. He awoke. A cup was pushed into his hands, while he was forced groggily to sit upright against the headboard.

"Drink it down, Will," whispered Hannibal. "You need to rest. The first time is very emotional for any person, but especially for you . . . you were at your most vulnerable, exposing your soul and body for another to see, and you have suffered so much that this took a great deal of trust."

"You make me sound like a virgin on their first date."

"Oh, believe me, Will. I have plans for tonight; 'virgin' will not apply to you. I want you to rest, after which I want us to make up for lost time . . . I want to taste your seed, feel you inside me, and take you from every position imaginable. We will only be finished when there is nothing left to give, after which we can sleep in each other's arms in front of the fireplace."

Will laughed. He rapidly blinked away the sleep from his eyes. The tea gave off a rich aroma, something sweet and yet somehow bitter, and he swirled the contents with a fatigued hand, where the brown hue gave way to a slightly red whirlpool within. He sipped at the cup. The brief thought ran through his mind: *why wake me to tell me to sleep*? Will continued to drink, while Hannibal sat at the edge of the mattress still in his gown, and a light-headed dizziness broke over Will, whose grip loosened and hands trembled. Hannibal took the cup from him.

The clatter of the saucer was placed on the bedside table. Will felt his eyes close, as images moved within his mind's eye . . . like dreams imposed on reality, imagination blurring with reality . . . a terrible falling sensation struck him, despite sitting upright, and Hannibal guided him back into a prone and lying position. The sheets were pulled up to his chin, while Hannibal tucked him in like a child, and the room seemed to darken despite the bright lights.

"Sleep, Will," said Hannibal. "You must be tired."

"I – I feel – I can't –" Will slurred.

"This is normal. It was a major first for you."

The pillow was cool against his cheek, while the sheets soon warmed to his body. He tried to open his eyes, but they were too heavy . . . half-lidded, he strained to see the room, while his vision blurred and breathing slowed . . . his muscles relaxed. The ache in his behind seemed to vanish, while a blissful calmness washed over him . . . there was a sound of rustling, something indistinct and yet familiar, and his eyes closed on one final image:

Hannibal was dressing . . .

Chapter 19

A rap at the door . . .

It barely broke through his consciousness. A vice-like pain broke at his temples, as he struggled to lift his head from the cool pillows beneath him, and – each time he found strength to half sit upright – he would fall back with a heavy thud against the sheets. He let his fingers fumble against the fabric. The sheets were clean. He was also dressed in an over-sized shirt with a loose pair of shorts, which meant that someone changed him and the bed while he slept.

The light spoke of the early hours of the morning, as his eyes struggled to adjust to what must have been six . . . *no, seven* . . . o'clock. Will threw out a hand to his side. *Nothing*. He groaned, while his hand ran over smooth sheets and covers and pillows, and – despite his clumsy search – nothing was to be found. Will rolled his head. He blinked several times to clear his vision, until he spotted a handwritten note: *'I'm sorry, Will. I had to leave for work, but you looked so peaceful that I daren't wake you. You were truly a beautiful sight to behold, and I'm grateful that it was the first sight I saw. My love for you is eternal – Hannibal'.*

Will smiled. The knocking returned.

He cursed, as he dragged his bare feet onto the floor. He stood. The movement nearly sent him hurtling back onto the bed, and – as he strode towards the door – he nearly stumbled and caught himself at the last moment against the doorframe. It was slightly chilled in the hallway, like someone had turned off the central heating out of force of habit, and he ran a hand through his hair, while he walked a wavy line down the staircase. A buzz of his phone upstairs betrayed that it was someone he knew . . . someone impatient . . . *Jack or Beverly* . . .

"I'm coming," called Will.

A soft patter of footsteps on tile echoed about the lounge. He threw himself as fast as he could manage into the hall, while his behind ached with the speed and sudden use of muscles, and – with a blush – he paused at the door itself to readjust his shorts. Will opened the door. Beverly stood with an arm filled with folders, while a huge bag hung from her shoulder, and bloodshot eyes looked to him with tired black bags beneath them. Beverly rushed out in a whisper:

"They found the sixth and final body, Will."

The skin about her face was pale, as her hands clenched at the folders. He saw the bitten edges of her nails, along with ink-stains about her fingertips, and his shoulders sagged with a heavy weight, as his mouth ran dry and eyes watered. Will looked behind Beverly. The street was mostly empty, save for one or two people busying about for their early commutes, and there was no sign of Hannibal in sight. He stepped aside and held the door open for Beverly.

"You better come inside," said Will.

He let his fingers fall away from the door. He was already halfway to the kitchen, by the time Beverly spilled inside and dropped her possessions near the fireplace, and he paused only as he heard her darting footsteps, as he muttered out a forced apology. Beverly lightly slapped the back of his head and chided him for the lack of help, before waving one particular folder in front of his face, and – with a roll of her eyes – moved into the kitchen, before she jumped up onto a stool in front of the main island. Will followed and made his way to the counter, as he asked:

"When was it found?"

"You seriously need to ask that?"

"Just . . . humour me."

Will moved to one of the far cupboards. He pulled out several pots of tea leaves, where – hidden at the very back of the shelf – was a secret stash of instant coffee. Will went about to the kettle and mugs, where he froze just before the kitchen waste-bin . . . *sparks of colour, ceramic on scraps* . . . there were pieces of broken teacup scattered on the surface. He winced, before he proceeded to make two mugs without word. Beverly took hers without complaint, as he sat opposite her with a slight wince, and he fidgeted from cheek to cheek. He asked:

"Seriously, Bev. What aren't you telling me?"

"They found it outside Jack's place."

A cold sweat broke over Will. It seeped through the fabric of the shirt, which clung to his back like a second skin, and his eyes fell heavy and focused on Beverly, as the sole sentence served to sober him from his half-asleep state. The cup was hot against his fingers. It turned the skin of his palm red, as he held tight and took in slow hissed breaths. Each flare of his nostrils betrayed the depth of his emotion, as his eyes narrowed and jaw clenched, and he lowered his head out of instinct, allowing dark shadows to be cast over his expression. He swallowed hard.

"You're joking," said Will.

"Do I *look* like I'm joking?" Beverly winced. "It was posed on a goddamned crucifix of all things! I don't know what the Jigsaw Killer was trying to express with that one . . . Jack called Hannibal to give a profile; it's kind of like the guy is the new Will Graham, and I can't even imagine what bullshit he's spewing right now. I thought you were the alpha here, Will?"

"So what? I should 'control my omega', is that it?"

"Not what I meant, but now you mention it . . ."

"If anyone else was listening, they'd think you were serious," laughed Will. "I couldn't tell Hannibal what to do, even if I tried, and I wouldn't want to . . . let's face it, him being a profiler allows him to control the pace of the case and its direction. He can make sure he

never gets caught, and now he's dropped off the final body -? He's done. He can move on . . .”

“And play happy families?”

Will shrugged.

“Well, I had the police watch the house,” said Beverly. “They saw Hannibal leave. He went to a pharmacy to pick up a prescription he forgot, seems to be pregnancy vitamins and hormones, and then drove back home, where he stopped by a fast-food joint on the way. We thought that was odd, but an officer happened to be eating there at the time; he just said that he had a craving and was too embarrassed for anyone to find out that the culinary wiz ate burgers like the rest of us.

“They lost trace of him after that. The GPS on his phone registers him as returning home not long after, and he made a phone-call from the landline to Bedelia, so we can technically ‘prove’ he has an alibi, but we can't prove he didn't leave the house again after that . . . I mean, *can* you act as his alibi? You must have seen him come home, right? Last night?”

Will lowered his gaze, as he brought the mug to his lips. The hot liquid seemed to push back and forth against them like a tide, as he toyed with the idea of taking a sip, and – with a sigh – finally swallowed down the bitter beverage, as his eyes watered once again. Beverly watched him. It was difficult to discern the meaning behind her stare, but she kept perfect posture as she spun the contents of the coffee around in the mug. The thick scent barely hid the staggered sigh, as Will choked out a fast and mumbled sentence almost inaudible behind the mug:

“I . . . I think he drugged me.”

Beverly jerked. The hot coffee tumbled over her fingers, which brought a loud curse from her mouth, and she stared with wide eyes at Will, even as she shook her hands to try and rid herself of the burning liquid. Will darted to the sink, as he snatched at a tea-towel and soaked the end in cold water. He handed it back to Beverly, who ran it over her fingers, before she pushed aside the mug and came around the island to stand next to Will. He sat back down. The way she stood over him reminded him a little of an old school-teacher he once knew in his youth.

“Wait,” said Beverly. “*What*?”

“I can't *prove* it, but . . . yeah.” Will sighed. “We . . . we made love for the first time, you know? It was . . . I don't know . . . I'm certainly not giving you details, like a schoolgirl to her girlfriend after prom, but -? He made me some tea afterward. I vaguely recall it might have had a weird taste to it, but maybe I'm misremembering . . . I just know . . . I just know I passed out . . .”

“You passed out?”

“I was groggy and disorientated, like when they put you under for sedation? I felt like I was leaving my body and my muscles grew all relaxed, and I was melting into myself, until I was

fast asleep in probably less than a minute. I woke up late this morning . . . actually *you* woke me up, so I haven't even had a chance to drink or wash or piss. The cup's in the trash . . . *broken* . . . I bet he scrubbed it clean and 'dropped' it by accident, so no evidence there."

"You know . . . if he put his foresight into the forces of good -?"

"Yeah, he could probably have cured cancer by now." Will chuckled. "I – I *know* it's him, Beverly. I know it! I still see things sometimes . . . I see Abigail watching over me, I see a wendigo-creature in the corners of rooms . . . I'm not crazy, I swear, but last night – while he was taking me – I saw him as this – this – this . . . this *monster* . . ."

Will dropped back against the island counter. He leaned on his elbows, while he stretched and spread his legs, and – with a sigh – stared up at the lights of the ceiling, until they left burning afterimages against his retinas. The images of the night before flooded back to him . . . *the stag-man clad in black behind him, the thrusts visible within the mirror . . . violation, pleasure . . . terror, desire* . . . Will toyed with the edge of the counter. He bit into his lip, while his foot kicked a lazy pattern against the rung of the stool, and finally choked out:

"If he's truly done as the Jigsaw Killer, he may never kill again."

"There's the Copycat Killer."

"Yeah, who *also* may never kill again," spat Will. "I know that Miriam and Abigail are still technically missing, but we have to be realistic . . . Miriam probably was collateral damage, getting too close to the case, and Abigail was likely -? I don't know. It's the one part I don't understand. Abigail was a daughter to us both; why would he murder her like that?"

"I suppose it could have been to muddy the waters, like to frame you temporarily or to motivate you into finding the Chesapeake Ripper, but it could just be that she was another thing in the way of your undivided attention . . . everything he does, he does for you. So . . . yeah . . ."

"It's just . . . it's killing me inside . . ."

"Not knowing what happened to her?"

"Not knowing how I *feel* about not knowing what happened."

Will blushed. He climbed to his feet, as he took his mug into hand. The contents were soon poured down a drain, before he busied himself by hiding the instant coffee back into its spot, and took to tidying an already spotless kitchen, until – with a slam of hands on countertop – tears finally spilled down his cheeks. He let his hands form into fists. He hunched forward. A few broken sobs mingled with his laughter, until a gentle touch fell upon his shoulder. Will shrugged her away and spun around. He wrung his hands against the air and cried out:

"I feel so fucking conflicted, Bev!"

"It's understandable . . ."

“Is it?” Will let loose a broken sound. “If you were fucking raped by a man, one who gas-lighted you into thinking you were the rapist, and who *very likely* killed or kidnapped your surrogate daughter, while acting as a serial killer in his spare time, only to later drug you so you couldn’t refute his alibi when dumping the last of his corpses -? Would *you* hesitate to run?”

“I wouldn’t hesitate to shoot him while he slept, to be honest.”

“Exactly, so *why the fuck* do I still feel for him? I wish I could say I stay out of fear alone . . . fear he might hurt the child, kill the child . . . fear he could slice my head open as a final ‘goodbye’, unable to handle the break-up . . . but I actually goddamned fucking *love* him.”

“You can’t turn feelings on and off, Will. If you could, every omega in an abusive relationship would run for the hills . . . there wouldn’t be that cycle of good and bad, of excuses and reasons, because they’d just know – in their hearts – it wasn’t worth the abuse of a beta or alpha partner. I mean, don’t get me wrong, you’re still fucking crazy, but . . . an understandable crazy.”

“An ‘understandable crazy’?”

“Well . . . he’s good to you, right? I mean, the rape excluded. He listens to you, makes time for you, cooks for you, cleans for you . . . you live here rent-free, you have a guy willing to carry your child . . . if you were working instead of him, it’d be like that old-timey traditional couple, with him as the ideal house-spouse. He’d die for you . . . *kill* for you . . .

“I mean, we spend our lives chasing the idea of unconditional love. We want someone to sweep us off our feet . . . to be our first, last, and only . . . to make us their absolute priority in life. It’s just no one ever tells us how unhealthy and obsessive and co-dependent it is in reality.”

“Wow, romantic much? I’m sure some people make it work.”

“Maybe, when it’s an open exchange and not a manipulated one.” Beverly sighed. “I know some people who *love* that whole dynamic; Jimmy is always saying he’s tempted to retire and stay-at-home, and I think he kind of wants to wait and serve on Brian, even if it’s not very ‘progressive’ to admit, like he’s setting back a cause or something, but . . . it’s his *choice*. How much of this – *any of this* – has been a choice on your part? You’re just a puppet with strings, Will.”

Beverly placed her hands on his shoulders. He took in choked breaths, as his chest heaved up and down with wracked sobs, and – even as the tears stopped – he risked hyperventilation with every breath, while his hands trembled at his sides. They shook with an uncontrollable rhythm, until his fingers started to close in on themselves, as if someone were holding them and forcing them into a half-formed fist. A sensation struck at his scalp, like insects crawling over his skin. Beverly shook him. It forced him to look directly into her eyes, as she firmly locked his gaze into place.

“You need to run, Will,” said Beverly. “I mean it.”

“He’s carrying my child, Beverly.” Will sniffled and sighed. “What can I do? I don’t want him to abort the foetus . . . I know it’s barely even two months, but I’m still – I don’t know – attached to the idea of a child? I never thought I’d be a father, but now . . . now I want to do right by them, I want to see them grow up, and I want to have that connection. I know they don’t exist yet, not really, but to lose them is like losing the *potential* and all that comes with that . . .

“And I can’t leave him with the child, can I? If he runs while pregnant . . . if he runs with them . . . I don’t know how they’ll be raised, if they’ll be abandoned, even if he’d kill them like he’s killed everyone else that I’d gotten close to . . . even other killers.” Will laughed. “I feel trapped, Beverly. I’m trapped, because I love him, sure, but I love my child more.”

“He’s got you exactly where he wants you, Will.”

“You still think he planned the rape and pregnancy?”

“Well, duh,” said Beverly. “Think about it . . . if Abigail were dead, and you didn’t have a baby on the way, what would you done? You would have felt betrayed, angry, and you probably would have wanted some form of revenge, no matter how conflicted you felt. You’d love him, yeah, but you’d have no loyalties to him and no child to tether you to him . . .

“Can you honestly tell me that you wouldn’t have gone straight to Jack? I know Jack suspects him, too, and it’d only be a matter of time before the two of you tried to entrap him. I don’t know if you’d have gone through with it . . . maybe you’d have told him, maybe you’d have run away with him . . . all I know is that you’re not a good liar, Will. How long until he worked out what you were up to? How would he even *react* to something like that?

“How many people would have *died* because of your game? No . . . I mean, I know he’s done this to – like – trap you with him, so you’re afraid to betray him and afraid to leave him, but maybe it’s for the best? It’s forcing you – *us* – to think . . . if we make a move, it needs to be when we have absolute proof and it needs to be when we know he can’t run . . .”

“And you’ll need me on the inside,” said Will. “You’ll need me to make sure he doesn’t get tipped off to the fact you’re onto him, and to make sure that the baby is safe, so when you make a move . . . it’ll still be a game, but just it won’t be Jack pulling the strings.”

“Hey, I can do this on my own if I have to,” swore Beverly.

“Sorry, I didn’t mean to offend . . .”

Will slipped away from her hands. He moved to the island countertop, where she had placed her file, and – with a shaking finger – flicked the pages open . . . a photograph slid out . . . *a wooden crucifix on a neatly trimmed lawn, a corpse dressed in the robes of a judge, the hands and face all different shades and different ethnicities* . . . Will retched. He flipped the folder closed again, as he thought back to the incisions on the torsos, the removal of organs . . . *a sociopathic serial killer* . . . *a monster* . . . *his lover* . . . Beverly found strength to whisper:

“If you don’t think you can do it, Will, that’s okay.”

“If I don’t do this, I’ll be forced to live with a man that I can’t trust,” said Will. “I’ll never know how I feel or what I want, because my only option will be to protect my child in a world in which omegas always have more parental rights . . . especially a neurotypical one with a better paying job. I used to think him killing me was the worst case scenario, but -?

“No.” Will winced. “No, I can’t lose another child, Beverly! The frustrating part is that if I *do* this, it’s still a lose-lose situation, because how do I explain to my son or daughter that I was the one to sentence their father to lethal injection and deprive them of that parental influence?”

“I can do this on my own, if I need to, Will . . .”

“I don’t know . . . *I don’t know* . . . I want closure and justice, but a part of me just wants to run away with him, too, and I don’t know what to think or feel. I shouldn’t be asking you to do this on your own, and I’m happy to investigate however I can, but equally -? I don’t know. Is it wrong that I just want to forget about all of this and live in denial with our baby?”

He cast his eyes to the refrigerator. A sole magnet held a small image in place, in an approximation of a ‘normal’ household, and the image was that of an ultrasound. The black-and-white foetus was small and barely formed, but somehow recognisable as a human . . . the gender would be unknown for some weeks, the dynamic a mystery until birth . . . still, there was the image of their child laid bare. Will brought his hand to his chest, as a broken smile jerked the corners of his mouth. Beverly stepped in his line of view to say in a low voice:

“Just don’t forget who and what he is, okay?”

Will laughed. It was an uncontrollable sound. It brought a wince from Beverly, who stepped back with her lips parted with an aborted word, and – as she made to speak – he raised a hand in a signal to stop, before he ran a hand over the back of his neck. The laughter soon died, only to be replaced by a cold stare and pursed lips. He locked eyes with Beverly. He stood tall. Beverly looked him over, before she smiled in response, and he smiled back despite himself.

“I mean it, Will,” said Beverly. “I don’t want to lose my best friend.”

“Don’t worry,” said Will. “I could never forget what he is.”

Will winced, before whispering out: “*Never*. . .”

Chapter 20

‘You are beautiful . . .’

Hannibal lay on his side. He traced his fingertips along a muscular arm, where he lightly tickled the flesh with figures-of-eight, and soon his lips pressed against a broad shoulder, until Will stirred and rolled onto his back. The smile he bore lit up the bedroom. A light sheet barely covered his modesty, while he threw his arms high above his head. Hannibal nuzzled closer, although the swell to his stomach forced some distance, and a sigh fell from his lips.

The last few months had extended the abdomen to a large extent, enough that Will coaxed him onto his back in turn, before nuzzling against him instead. He pressed his cheek to Hannibal’s shoulder, while entwining their legs and fingers, and their combined hands rested just above the highest point of the stomach, where a small foot would kick against the skin. It would sometimes leave a visible outline against the flesh, but other times would simply kick with enough force to be felt against the palm of one’s hand. Hannibal buried his nose into Will’s hair.

‘We could immigrate to Italy,’ whispered Hannibal.

Will tensed. The muscles grew taut in his arms and back, while Hannibal breathed deep a rich and earthy scent from his mussed and sweat-soaked hair. The sheets clung to him in an indecent manner, while a small stain on the bed marked the remnants of their love-making, and a few love-bites along his neck served as evidence of the overall intensity of their passion. Will kept his gaze downward. Hannibal quirked an eyebrow in response, as he slowly extricated his hand and brought it to a stubble-covered chin, and he forced Will to meet his eyes.

‘Italy?’ Will asked. ‘Why Italy?’

‘I had a wonderful time with my studies there,’ said Hannibal. ‘I believe I could find a job quite easily, and there are a few positions in a university I know that pay far greater than what even I could earn with my own psychiatric practise here. That is not to mention how good the education and healthcare system would be for our son in comparison to here.’

‘I mean, I’ve never travelled abroad before, but –’

‘I would suggest Lithuania or France, but they come with too many memories. If you have never travelled before, think of all the places we could see together . . . England is only four hours from Italy, and Greece a mere stone’s throw away . . . it would be ideal, Will.’

Will bit into his lip. He slowly pulled himself away from Hannibal. The sheets pulled away from him, as he slid around on the bed and dropped his feet to the floor. He was hunched forward, with his hands lightly gripping the edge of the mattress, and his head was hung too low to see his expression, even as he fidgeted from side to side where he waited. Hannibal stayed silent. He ran his hands over his stomach, while he watched Will simply stay still . . . breathing deep, scratching the sheets . . . after several minutes, Will finally choked out:

‘Can – Can I think about it?’

‘Do you really need time to think about this, Will?’

‘My family are here,’ muttered Will. ‘Okay, maybe not flesh-and-blood, but Jack and Beverly and Alana . . . I’d hoped Alana might even be godmother, you know? I have my job. I have my house. I just – I just think we need time . . . I *need time . . . let me think a while?’*

‘Time is a very fragile and very limited commodity, Will.’

Will stood. He half-turned in the low-light, so that his face could be seen, but his member remained somewhat hidden by the chosen angle, and his eyes half-narrowed on sight of Hannibal, who smiled back with narrowed eyes in turn. Will finally turned fully, enough to expose every inch of handsome flesh and toned muscle. Hannibal reached out a hand. Will took it with a firm hold. They remained holding hands, even as one stood and one reclined, and the distance between them felt miles, despite their physical connection. Will whispered:

‘We have time, though, don’t we?’

‘I certainly hope so . . .’

* * *

Will leaned against the doorframe. He folded his arm across his chest; every movement of his limbs brought a small rustle of fabric on fabric, as the expensive shirt rubbed against the waistcoat, and he blushed to think that the cufflinks cost more than the entirety of his wardrobe alone . . . a wardrobe now shared with Hannibal. He smiled. He raked his eyes over the man standing in their dressing room, who hogged the full-length mirror in a familiar scene.

The suit he wore was more expensive, but the expense was borne from necessity. It was tailored to fit the swell of a heavily pregnant person, so that there was no visible strain or wrinkles, and the buttons were perfectly placed to minimise the sense of size. He stood with his back to the mirror, as he unbuttoned his shirt and waistcoat. He looked over his shoulder. It was easy to see his eyes as they roamed over the curve to his back and buttocks, while he slowly undressed down to a silken pair of black boxers. Will licked at his lip, as he teased:

“Are you checking out your own ass?”

Hannibal met his eye in the mirror. The stomach was fit to burst, with the belly-button now extended outward, and there were stretch-marks along the taut skin, which would provide a permanent record of their baby’s growth. Hannibal walked slowly out of the dressing room, before closing the door behind him. The suit was folded neatly on a chair, but tomorrow it would be taken to a dry-cleaner and later stored in a bag at the back of the closet, where – maybe – it could be used again some decades from now by their son. Will blinked back tears.

He fought to compose himself; the smile refused to leave his face, while the blush lit up his cheeks with a soft glow, and – even as Hannibal practically waddled to the bed – Will could not bring look anywhere else other than at his partner. Hannibal sat awkwardly on the edge of

the mattress, before swinging his legs around onto the sheets. He scooted back. A hand came to pat the other wise of the bed, while half-lidded eyes met with Will's gaze, and he whispered:

"I would rather check out *your* ass."

"Oh? Is that the best come-on you got?"

"I will point out that English is not even my third language."

"Oh, and is that the best *excuse* you have?"

Will laughed and obeyed the gesture. He climbed onto the mattress, where he crawled beside Hannibal, and – with a light scoff – Hannibal swatted at his buttocks, almost teasing . . . *almost promising* . . . Will purposely knelt. It was a position much like the stereotype of a submissive omega, with forearms flat and forehead pressed down, and buttocks outward as if ready to be taken, until Hannibal swatted at them again with a playful curse in Lithuanian.

The bedroom descended into laughter, as Will dropped down beside him. A bounce of the mattress had Hannibal rolling onto his side, until both were facing each other with soft smiles, and the small gap between them felt like miles without contact. He reached slowly towards his partner. Will stopped just short of Hannibal, who broke the last of the distance to take his hand, and – entwining their fingers – they physical contact provided a gentle warmth. A soft thumb ran over his skin, as Hannibal squeezed closer and asked in a warm voice:

"How does it feel to be married, Will?"

Will moved closer. The suit was uncomfortable, especially when lying against the soft sheets, and – with a trembling hand – he slowly unbuttoned the waistcoat and shirt, before Hannibal helped him to slide the fabric from his frame. Will sought to form words, as he was stripped piece by piece of his suit. The pieces were dropped to the floor. He lifted his knee once nude, in an attempt to hide his privates, and – with a chuckle – Hannibal pushed his leg back down, exposing his body to his sights . . . *'even now, it is like our first time'* . . . Will blushed.

"Honestly?" Will sighed. "I don't know how I feel."

"Hmm?" Hannibal kissed at his neck. "Why is that, my love?"

"I guess, growing up, I always pictured a more traditional wedding. I'd find some beta woman, we'd likely get married in a church or city hall, and she'd probably already have a kid, you know? So I'd get to be a father, but without . . . without passing on my genetics . . . without knowing that something could be wrong with the child, or that I could resent them as –"

"You fear seeing yourself in them?"

"Yeah." Will winced. "I know it's a bit of a mood-killer to admit, but a part of me thinks that's why Abigail was the perfect daughter . . . she was perfect *because* I didn't have a part

in her creation, but at the same time I could still shape and mould her into something greater . . . something greater than *me*. I guess so close to the birth -? I'm just scared."

"You do want our child, correct? I am afraid that at nearly nine-months, there is very little that I could do to prevent the inevitability of their arrival. It would be most upsetting to know that you are having second-thoughts at this late a stage . . . *are* you having second thoughts?"

"What? No. *No*. God, no!"

Will pulled away. He used his hands to push along the sheets, until his back pressed itself to the headboard, and – with a hiss – he arched his back away from the cold material, as it slowly warmed and allowed him to sit in a more natural position. The sheets tangled about his legs. A pair of soft hands pulled them up to his waist; Hannibal joined him at his side, where he stretched out his legs in an awkward manner, so as to accommodate his stomach. Will leaned against him, where he rested his head against the bare shoulder. Hannibal asked:

"You do not mean to leave us?"

"I'd rather *die* than do that," spat Will. "Do you know what it's like? Do you know what it's like to wake up and wonder *why* your parent left you? Do you know what it's like to see other children with both parents and not understand why you're not like them? It's this lonely, alienating feeling . . . this difference . . . this *confusion*. I hated every second of it.

"Most of all, I hated how I blamed myself . . . *still* blame myself. It's no secret that I'm pretty much on the spectrum, Hannibal, and it's no secret I wasn't the perfect child . . . what if I was better behaved, what if I was normal, what if I were an omega like her? I spent my whole life trying to be better, trying to be normal . . . waiting for her to come back, because isn't parental love meant to be natural and instinctual? What was *wrong* with me that she couldn't love me?

"I know now logically it wasn't me . . . some people just aren't cut out to be parents, but I know it's still there and I know it still affects my relationships, my self-perception . . . if you were to ask me if I could do that to my child? No. It's my worst fear . . . my worst fear is *becoming* her and putting a child through that life-changing trauma. I would never do that."

A warm finger brushed against his cheek. It caught at a tear, one that he failed to notice spilled from his eyes, and – with a nervous laugh – he pulled back with a broken laugh, while a muttered apology tumbled from his mouth. Hannibal pressed a kiss to his forehead, before stroking the back of his knuckles down to Will's chest. He finally pressed a hand to a beating heart. Will swallowed hard the lump that formed in his throat, while staring at an unfixed spot in the distance, until Hannibal took his chin and guided him back to eye-contact, as he whispered:

"So why is it that you do not seem happy, Will?"

"I don't mind that life didn't turn out how I planned," said Will. "I just assumed I'd be alone forever anyway, but then -? I don't know. You gave me hope, Hannibal. You came into my life and offered me the partnership that I thought impossible, the family I always wanted . . .

you gave me support, love, friendship . . . you gave me *you*, and I'm grateful, I am, it's just -!"

Will ran his hands over his face.

"I always thought my ideal partner would be someone I'd *trust*." Will sighed. "It was a weird kind of trust, yeah, as I don't think I could have ever shown them what was inside me . . . the fears, the traumas, the memories . . . I don't think I could have ever trusted them to see me the same way after seeing how broken I am, but I would trust them with my life and body and soul.

"It – It feels the reverse with you, Hannibal. I've somehow told you *everything* . . . I've told you every trauma, every weakness, and every memory . . . I've trusted you not to judge me or hate me or leave me, but still -? I – I don't know . . . I don't trust you not to use it against me. I don't trust you not to kill me, like . . . like you killed *her*. I also don't know if I can forgive, and that scares me more than anything . . . you raped me, you made me think I was crazy, and you –"

Will pulled away from Hannibal. He swung around his legs, until his feet touched down on the rug beneath the bed-frame, and pressed his hands onto the edge of the mattress, while the sheets tangled around his waist to cover his member. He pressed his lips tightly together, as he forced back the words that threatened to spill forth into the silence: *'you killed my daughter'.* A flutter of a curtain moved in his peripheral vision, and his eyes moved to a shadow in the corner of the room . . . *a half-formed shape, a glint of white in the eye* . . . Will reached toward her . . .

Abigail . . . he could almost hear her voice, as the scent of her perfume drifted through the bedroom, and he could feel her eyes on him . . . mouth parted, words unspoken . . . the movement of her lips was like an unheard warning. Hannibal followed his gaze. There was no change in his expression, as if he were looking at the air itself, and – as the curtains billowed out again before her frame – Abigail bled into the darkness and vanished once more.

Will took in a shuddered breath. He ran a hand through his hair and over his neck, and turned to look over his shoulder towards Hannibal, who slowly slid across the bed to sit beside Will. The warmth of his skin was like fire against him, until every nerve felt aflame, and his muscles tensed to the point that his limbs ached at the joints. He gritted his teeth. He screwed shut his eyes. A few tears mingled with sweat, while the hand of Hannibal ran light circles around his upper back, and Will finally found strength to choke out in a broken breath:

"Jack knows."

Silence descended. The hand on his back stilled. A long hiss escaped flared nostrils, as Hannibal stared ahead at the fluttering curtains that took shape in the breeze, and – with a low sigh – slowly stood from the bed, with his hand lingering with a tight squeeze on Will's shoulder. Hannibal walked toward the fireplace. The hand slid away until there was only a strange emptiness on his skin, and his body instinctively turned as if in search of more contact, while Hannibal paced nude before the roaring fire. He maintained his dignified composure, with head held high, and soon he stopped with the light flickering against him, as he asked in a calm voice:

“What does Jack know, Will?”

“I told Beverly everything,” mumbled Will. “I *had* to tell her. Jack just . . . he suspected . . . he asked that I get close to you, hoped that we could maybe entrap you into a confession, but you never actually admitted to anything or said the words. After a while -? I – I don’t know, I just fell more and more into the rabbit hole . . . I’m not even sure I want to climb back out.”

“Why are you telling me this now?”

“We’re married, aren’t we? I – I wasn’t lying about that, Hannibal. I love you . . . I think – I think I see what you wanted for me . . . for *us* . . . I know we haven’t talked about what you’ve done, whether you’re even still doing it or would do it again . . . I know we haven’t talked about whether you want to stop or want me to join you, but I just -! I can’t help how I feel.

“They’re getting close, Hannibal. I can’t bear the idea of you losing your life . . . I would never see you die, never see you hurt . . . whether I could see you behind bars -? I don’t know. I thought it’s what I wanted, to see you lose your freedom, but . . . I’m not sure I could live with *knowing* where you were, what I took from you, and that conflict between wanting to see you and yet not really being able to be with you. At the same time, isn’t it karma?

“Thanks to you, I was in hospital in a fucking *coma* for weeks on end, and you had lures made up with hair inside . . . were you going to frame me? Was that going to be your first choice or a desperate last resort? You’ve been playing me all this time, and I hate myself for loving you, but at this point I can’t leave you . . . I’ve toyed with the idea or running away with you, but . . .”

Hannibal grunted, as he returned to pacing before the fireplace. The flickering flames cast him in a strange shadow when he turned back to Will, so that he seemed to alternate between light and darkness, and Will struggled to focus his eyes, as he sought to keep Hannibal in his peripheral vision. The racing of his heart grew to a painful tightness in his chest, while the pulsing in his ears drowned out all other sound, and finally it brought with it a nausea that burned at his throat, threatening to choke him on the bile and undigested cake. Hannibal stood still once more.

“They have no evidence,” said Hannibal.

“They have enough for a search warrant,” said Will. “Beverly is going through your finances and properties and movements with a fine tooth-comb, even going back to Italy, and they’ve found a guy . . . an Inspector Pazzi? They’re in liaison with him as we speak. I think Jack wants to go through your house and office . . . I – I figured you’d want time to burn your books, maybe dispose of what’s in the freezer . . . there’s time to get rid of the evidence.”

“Am I to get rid of the evidence for me or for us?”

“For you? For us? Is there a difference?”

“I did all of this for you, Will.” Hannibal turned. “I may have used your mental illness to my advantage, but it lead to you to kill an infamous killer, did it not? The death of Tobias Budge

was a tragic one, but his death stopped the distractions that kept us apart, and – without him as an obstacle between us – we could fully dedicate our lives to one another."

Will shook his head . . . *together* . . . his lips jerked and twitched, forcing his expression into a painful grimace, and his tears stopped streaming down his cheeks, while the visible trails dried against flushed skin. He lifted a visibly trembling hand. It reached towards where Hannibal stood, as it alternated between a fist and open palm, before it dropped . . . *heavy, lifeless* . . . a loud thud echoed out from where it struck the soon-to-be martial bed. He cricked his neck, while his tongue wetted his lips. He drew in a deep breath. Will turned to face Hannibal, as he spat:

"They *know*."

A series of footsteps sounded out. They stopped in front of Will. He stared forward with an empty focus, as his eyes fell upon a clothed crotch that was all too familiar, and – with a blush – lifted his eyes along the trail of chest hair towards a face that stared down. It was cast in such shadow that it was made angular and thin, enough that he could almost see where the visible veins on white flesh bled into the inky blackness of the wendigo. Hannibal said in a cold voice:

"You make it sound like I should run alone."

Will snatched at Hannibal's hands. They were cold despite the flames of the fire, almost icy against his own burning flesh, and Will placed kisses to the palms and wrists . . . *the same hands that prepared home-cooked meals, the same hands that rubbed lotion onto a pregnant abdomen . . . the same hands that wrapped around his neck during sex* . . . Will stared up into those narrowed eyes, as he half-shrugged. He let his hands move to the stomach, which he stroked lightly and diverted his gaze. A small footprint appeared against the skin.

"Will," said Hannibal. "Did you warn me so that I would flee alone?"

"I *married* you," said Will. "If I wanted you to be caught, I wouldn't have said anything in the first place. If I care enough for you to run, why wouldn't I want to run with you? Is that really how it sounded to you . . . like I wanted to just say goodbye to you . . . to our *son*? I – I don't know what I want, no, but whether I run or stay . . . I just know I can't see you captured."

"You truly do not know what you want?"

"Honestly? No, I don't." Will shook his head. "*You* betrayed *me*. You might have done it to keep me in your life, but it's asking a lot for me to just forget, like the ends justify the means . . . I can keep Jack at bay for now, but it won't be long . . . you need to leave now, before –"

"Before he and Beverly follow the trail of bread crumbs you left?"

"The only evidence will be the meat and books . . ."

Will pressed his head to the stomach. The faint scent of lotion filled his senses, with an almost calming effect, and his fingers traced patterns over the soft and stretched skin. Each

lazy kick of their unborn child struck against his palm, like little reminders of the life that would soon be brought into their world . . . into their madness. A broken laugh echoed about the bedroom. It was hard to know to whom it belonged, but still he felt it rumble and vibrate, until it could have been from both of them or none of them. A tear rolled down his cheek.

"You think I betrayed you," said Hannibal. "The greater betrayal is knowing that you hesitate to make a decision. I have given you all you desired . . . *a family* . . . *abject adoration* . . . in return you cannot give me unconditional loyalty in return. You consider leaving me."

"Don't – Don't make it sound like I'm the one who betrayed you."

"Oh, but you did, Will. You did. You would leave me without even a second thought."

"I – I've thought about nothing else!"

"Then you would consider leaving me even at all," spat Hannibal. "You would live with me, marry me, and sire my child . . . you would take all that I have to offer . . . I gave you my trust and my love, but in return you would push me aside and tell me to run. You wished to be anything but your mother, but you would abandon me – abandon *us* – as she left you."

A terrible blow struck deep within his chest. It was almost physical. The wind left Will in one fell swoop, as his lungs seemed to implode on themselves, and he hunched forward with a hand pressed to his chest, as he desperately tried to catch his breath. A cold sweat broke over him, like being forced deep into icy waters. He spluttered. He choked. He stared up with wide eyes, as the words circled around and around in his head . . . *'you would abandon me'* . . . *'as she left you'* . . . all emotion and reason left him, as his mind went blank . . . his heart stopped . . .

"N-No," stammered Will. "*No. No, no, no.*"

Hannibal stepped back. He took Will's hands by the wrist. They were pulled from his stomach, before being dropped midway between them, and – as he clamoured and clawed for Hannibal, the older man simply continued to step out of reach of them . . . *'no, please, no, no, no'* . . . Will slid to floor. The sheets tangled about his feet and legs, as he crawled towards Hannibal, and stumbled as he dragged his body towards his towering frame. He landed on all fours.

It took all his strength to continue . . . *knees burning on the rug, hands sliding on the floorboards . . . limbs trembling too much to support his weight* . . . he stopped short of Hannibal, where his hands clung to those bare legs, and tried to climb upward into a sitting position. He sobbed. The tears and snot dripped down into a hideous mess, as he forced out half-aborted words that were beyond comprehension, and finally – choking on saliva – knelt with legs spread and hands pressed to his thighs in a submissive pose. He stared awkwardly at the floor.

"N-No," pleaded Will. "I – I'm not like that. I warned you b-because –"

"Because you loved me?"

“Because I *love* you and I hate myself for loving you!”

Hannibal snatched at his hair. It sent a sting of pain searing through his scalp, before his head was wrenched back to expose his throat, and his eyes – still watering with tears – were forced to look upward at a smiling face cast in shadow. Will struggled to wrap a hand around the wrist; every instinct said to rip the hand away, but instead he clung to him . . . *contact* . . . *still there, still a part of his life* . . . *not quite rejected yet* . . . he lifted his other hand upward towards Hannibal, searching for his cheek for contact. Hannibal bent low and whispered:

“Prove it, Will.”

The hand let go of him. Will wrapped his arms around a leg, while his lips kissed a slow trail from feet to knee to the join of groin with thigh . . . *‘please, I’m sorry; please’* . . . Hannibal remained steady and stable, until the lips met the member barely restrained by shorts. A finger hooked under his chin, where it forced him upright before he could continue. Will swayed. He threw his hands onto those broad shoulders, while he kissed over and over at those cheeks . . . that jaw . . . those lips . . . he clung to Hannibal with all his strength.

“Let me run away with you,” begged Will.

A low hum fell from Hannibal. He lightly pushed at Will, until he was forced to walk backwards, and soon his legs struck the side of the mattress, where he collapsed down against the sheets. Hannibal kicked apart his legs, before standing between them. It should have been almost comical, or even arousing, to see him take charge with swollen stomach, but there was something that sent a shiver through Will. He struggled to half-sit with his weight on his elbows, as his mouth fell open and his eyes widened. Hannibal smiled. He leaned down, so that his had braced his weight, and pressed his lips to a sensitive ear, as he whispered in a husky tone:

“Whatever comes, let us have this moment.”

“You – You’ll run, won’t you? You’ll run and we can –”

“You have pushed the events into motion, Will,” murmured Hannibal. “I will promise you that I will not be caught, and I shall assure you no harm shall come to our son, but I cannot promise you what reckoning shall come after that . . . of all people, I never thought *you* would be the one to hurt me so deeply, but – like you – I never thought I *could* be hurt this deeply . . .”

The free hand unbuttoned his shorts. It freed his erection, which stood bare, and the impressive size and girth spoke of a desire to continue their consummation, as if no argument had taken place . . . as if neither were so deeply betrayed. Will fumbled beneath the pillows for the lubricant. He handed it to Hannibal. Even as he wept, he continued to chant his apologies like a mantra . . . one both meaningless and meaningful . . . his legs wrapped instinctively around Hannibal’s waist, while he dropped his body and threw arms around shoulders.

Hannibal squirted out an obscene amount. The preparation that followed was slow and sensual, coaxing arousal from Will, and almost making him forget what transpired . . .

warmth within, teasing strokes, careful stretching . . . Will was soon clenching around the digits, while choked gasps broke out in a repetitive – yet erotic – pattern. A small squelch echoed out, as Hannibal removed his fingers and got Will in an awkward position to accommodate the stomach.

"I love you, Will," swore Hannibal.

Will was almost bent in two, as the member slid slowly inside. He could feel the flared head against every ridge of his internal walls, while the heat felt like a volcano inside, and he instinctively clenched around the erection, while he clung onto Hannibal for dear life . . . *legs hooked over shoulders, fingernails digging into lower arms . . .* Will thrust back at Hannibal, as Hannibal thrust inside him. In a breathless whisper, he forced out a half-felt:

"I love you, too . . ."

Chapter 21

“Gotcha,” said Beverly.

The thick gloves held tight to the microscope. It was cold against her face, forcing her to pull back with a blush, and yet – despite years of practise and habit – she was drawn closer once again, until her eye became one with the lenses. The slide showed an image virtually identical to the two print-outs on the desk, with the same number of shapes, with the same distance between each one, and a smile broke across her face, bringing lines about her eyes.

Beverly slid back the office chair, as its wheel squeaked under her weight. The microscope never left her gaze, even as her hands fumbled over the papers and photographs and blown-up images, and she put the two largest side by side next to the microscope. The chair slid aside again, but this time it continued on a wild trail without her along for the ride. It stopped somewhere over by Jimmy’s desk, as Beverly stood hunched over her work-station, and – eyes still on the microscope – waved her hand wildly to her co-workers, as she called out:

“Guys, get over here!”

A low groan escaped Brian, who momentarily put his head in his hand. The piles of paperwork across his desk threatened to fall, as Jimmy hastily pushed aside a dental mould and x-rays, and the glare Brian delivered to him spoke of a very sleepless night and heavy case-load. Jimmy made his way across the room with swift movements, before stopping midway to look back over his shoulder. Brian threw up his hands and shrugged. The two stared at each other in silence, before Brian relented with a groan and dragged himself from his chair.

“Take a look at these,” said Beverly. “What do you see?”

“I know what I see,” teased Brian. “A woman with too much time on her hands.”

“You know what I see? A failed comedian. Just look will you?”

Beverly stepped aside. A wave of her hand signalled the microscope and slides. Jimmy was the first to dive into the microscope, as he adjusted the lens and switched from eye to eye, and Brian lazily pulled the various blown-up images towards him, while he waited his turn at the microscope. It was a long wait, but soon Jimmy muttered at apology and switched places. Brian looked down the lens, where he saw the same water sample that was reflected back on the various images to the side. He pulled back and looked between his two colleagues.

“It’s a perfect match,” said Jimmy.

“Yeah,” muttered Brian. “A perfect match of *what*?”

“Okay, well, this is the thing,” raced Beverly. “I was thinking about how the Jigsaw Killer never killed again after his initial spree, and how the Copycat Killer seems to have gone quiet, too, and it’s no secret that Jack agrees with me that there’s one particular suspect in

mind . . . we just – we just haven't been able to *catch* him yet, that's all. So I took a different approach . . .

"I figured that the key to catching him would be the victims we never found: Miriam Lass and Abigail Hobbs. I also looked into the mystery of the missing organs. We've focused so much on *who* was killed, and *how* they were killed, that we ended up running out of leads. It's not so much the victims we *have*, so but about those we *don't* have. I mean, Will has a theory about what could be up with the organs, so I took a selection of *hors d'oeuvres* and –"

"Wait, is *that* why Jack gave me a bunch of beef to analyse?" Brian asked. "Jesus, Bev! I wasted half a day on that shit. They have a serial rapist on the loose in the suburbs, and some suspected terrorist a few states over, but – no – I spent all day learning about Kobe beef instead."

"Okay, so Will picked up the wrong batch, that's all. We can –"

"Ooh," teased Brian. "I know, maybe Will is in on it!"

Brian lifted his hands and twiddled his fingers. He purposely widened his eyes and opened his mouth, as he assumed an expression of mock shock, and Jimmy – with a sigh – nudged him hard in his side, which knocked the wind from him in one harsh blow. Brian pouted. He glared at Jimmy, who looked to a far corner of the room with a 'butter wouldn't melt' expression, and he muttered out a low '*really'*, as Jimmy rubbed at his mouth to hide a smile. Brian dropped his shoulders and leaned against the desk, as he pinched the bridge of his nose.

"You know," said Jimmy. "Will *could* be in on it."

"I thought we established Will is innocent."

"No, *technically* we established Will *was* innocent. He's spent something like seven months living with Hannibal, and they just got married other day . . . which reminds me -! I was thinking we might use one of their centrepieces for inspiration for our anniversary party? I really loved the scent, and they say that the scents act like a form of aromatherapy for –"

"Jimmy? You were saying about Will?"

"Oh, right, well." Jimmy blushed. "Don't me wrong, I've never been one to believe in Stockholm Syndrome; it's always been a sexist 'diagnosis' that dismisses the psychology and choices of a woman and omegas, all because of an alpha man that couldn't take her contradiction of his personal perception of events and – . . . okay, that's a rant for another day . . .

"But what if – *if* – Will has lost himself in the role? There are a lot of cases with undercover agents falling in love, forgetting their previous lives, feeling conflicts in loyalties . . . this is a man that worships him after all. If you're spending all day with a man that adores you, protects you, and is carrying your baby -? Well, how long until you start to believe the lie . . . *want* to believe the lie . . . what even if you become an accomplice in the process?"

“Yeah, but all this assumed Hannibal *is* the killer,” said Brian. “I mean, sure, he *mostly* fits the profile, but . . . how many omega killers have there been in history? He has a good job, one that pays enough that what he pays in beef alone could heat our place for a month or more, and he’s carrying a baby . . . he’s settling down, he’s happy, he’s fulfilled. He’s an *omega*.”

Beverly and Jimmy both stared in his direction. He muttered a low ‘*what’,* as Jimmy rolled his eyes and shared a look with Beverly, and soon he could only say again *‘what? what!’*, while he looked from face to face in search of some form of answer. Jimmy crossed his arms over his chest, while he lifted his chin high enough that it added the illusion of height. Brian pouted. He ducked his head low, as he rammed his hands into his pockets, and he kicked haphazardly at the floor, while mumbling a string of almost inaudible apologies. Jimmy said:

“Excuse me. We *can’t* be killers?”

“This – *This* is the hill you want to die on?” Brian sighed. “Your fight for equality has come so far that now it’s a case of ‘omegas can be serial killing cannibals, too’! I mean, I’m not knocking omega rights, but it’s just a bit rich coming from you of all people . . .”

“And what’s that meant to mean?”

“You want to retire and stay at home with a bunch of kids!”

“No, I agreed to stay at home with *one* kid,” muttered Jimmy. “I’m still fertile, but I’m not a fan of children in the plural. I would rather have some cats, to be honest. I also thought I might pick up bee-keeping as a hobby . . . we could make our own honey!”

“Well, least honey beats soylent green.”

“Look, I know that statistically most violent crime is by alpha men, and we’d have to be fools to ignore the profiles . . . profiles given by Will and Hannibal, I’d add . . . but just, if *anything,* wouldn’t being an omega make it *easier* to be a serial killer? You have more time as the stay-at-home parent. You have people underestimating you. You’re invisible in society. You –”

“Guys,” shouted Beverly. “If you both shut up: I have *proof*!”

Beverly snatched at the blown-up images. They were shoved unceremoniously toward Jimmy and Brian, with such speed that they almost dropped from their hands, and soon she was snatching at files and maps and photos, before racing with armfuls toward the white board. A case was quickly swept off the board, before she stuck on the various collected documents. The red tape followed, leading one piece of paper to another, before she finally grabbed the images from them and pinned them beneath an image of a dismembered arm. Beverly said breathlessly:

“I took some water samples from Miriam’s arm a while back.”

“What about them?” Brian asked.

“It didn’t mean anything at the time,” said Beverly. “I narrowed them down to a large area, eventually to an old well that we thought she might have been kept in, and forensics bears that up, for sure. The whole place was set up like a lair; we have enough proof that the Copycat Killer at least used the place, but . . . well . . . we all know how *that* turned out.”

“Yeah,” said Jimmy. “It was empty and no leads.”

“Okay, so I figured that it meant someone took her out, maybe *before* we found her . . . the inside information weighs in with the fact Will *could* have conflicting loyalties, maybe he let something slip, but then where did he take her?” Beverly smiled. “I asked Will for an opinion, and Hannibal suggested *for* him that we run a few more samples. I found some seeds that come from a second location; they were buried so deep into her nails that I nearly missed them.

“The new location is a freaking *huge* area, mostly forests and cliffs, but there’s also some houses . . . I ran a check on all of them. I couldn’t link any to Hannibal. It seemed almost a dead end, but . . . one of the houses was linked to someone called Simonetta Murasaki. Jack sent someone to go check the place out, and apparently a young woman answered the door and showed them around and everything was in order . . . nothing suspicious at all.”

“Wait,” said Brian. “That name rings a bell.”

“It should,” said Beverly. “Murasaki is the name of Hannibal’s aunt. Simonetta is apparently the name of his mother. The weird thing -? The house belonged to a Christopher John Michaels until only a few days ago, at which point the deeds were transferred. The woman was said to be kind of out of it, too; the police said she was ‘another blonde omega housewife doped on diazepam and martinis’, before his boss slapped on the wrist for sexism. It shut him up in questioning.

“It was enough though that I’m wondering if whether the woman could be Abigail or Miriam, and let’s not forget how Bedelia went missing, too . . . awfully convenient, am I right? Accomplices? Hostages? Prisoners? I don’t know, but it’s like . . . it’s like he *knows* we’re after him. It was *Hannibal* who suggested I take another look at the arm. It was *Hannibal* that the name has a blatant link with. It’s *Hannibal* all the missing people link to. What if -?”

Beverly ran her hands over her face. The laboratory echoed out with footsteps, as she paced back and forth across the recently sterilised tiles, and her fingers soon buried themselves into her hair, where they dislodged the tight bun that was kept together mainly by a pencil. Brian tented his hands before his mouth, while he stared at the board with eyes visibly moving rapidly in all directions to take in every piece of information. A strange silence fell between them. Jimmy ran his fingers off the red string linking Miriam and Hannibal to a remote house. He choked out:

“What if he’s leading us straight to him?”

They all stopped. Beverly stood still, as she looked back to Jimmy. A look was exchanged between the three of them, while the house on the map was overlapped with a photograph, and – in the darkness – one could see through the glass to the vast interior. There was no sign of Hannibal. There was no sign of the blonde woman. Still, there was something about the

expensive interior that spoke of great expense and specific tastes, and a décor that was very reminiscent of the one that all three had seen even if just in passing . . . Brian whispered:

“You think he intentionally screwed up?”

“If Will let slip we’re onto him?” Jimmy winced. “Yeah.”

“Okay, let’s assume Hannibal *is* the killer. Why would he purposely tell us where to find evidence, and then change the deeds to create *more* suspicion? All this evidence is a little too neatly gift-wrapped, isn’t it? If it’s not a trap, is it a going away gift to us?”

“Tying up all loose ends?” Beverly asked.

“I mean, it could be? He gets the final laugh. It’s all a part of his game . . .”

The colour drained from Jimmy. He marched across the room to Beverly’s work-station, before he found her handbag and routed around inside. A loud *‘hey’* echoed out, as Beverly raced over toward him, but – without word – he took her mobile phone and rammed it into her hands. Beverly rapidly blinked. A few words tried to escape, but were cut dead by the wide-eyed stare that he offered her in return. He let his hands linger over hers. They trembled.

“Call Will,” said Jimmy.

“What?” Beverly asked. “Why?”

“Just call him, Beverly!”

Beverly struggled to unlock the phone. The eyes continued to stare with a great intensity, while Brian came over and lingered beside them, and – with shaking fingers – she flicked through her contacts until finally ‘Will’ came into view at the very bottom of her list. She paused. She looked to Jimmy, as she silently asked through her face alone: *‘what do I say’*? He winced. He simply looked quickly down to the phone and back to her, as she obediently pressed the button and brought the phone to her upper cheek, before waiting for the call to connect.

“Will?” Beverly asked. “Are you okay to talk?”

Silence. The panting on the line said someone was there . . . listening, waiting . . . a rustle of fabric was precipitated by the click of a door . . . *cries, moans, sobs* . . . the sound of someone in pain were all too familiar, all too heart-breaking . . . her blood ran cold. Brian grabbed her by her shoulders, as she swayed with a light-headed sensation that blurred her vision, but soon a man grunted out a ‘*hello’* . . . Will. It was Will. A broken sob escaped her, as she took in a deep rush of breath, and somehow found enough strength to rush out in a single gasp:

“Is Hannibal with you?”

“W-Why?”

“We – We think we have him, Will.”

The silence returned. It was a strange form of quiet, where only the heavy breathing of Will could be heard down the line, along with the cries of pain . . . the adrenaline rush wore slowly from her veins, leaving room for her mind to focus, and her full attention went onto the groans that pierced through the receiver. They were male. It was clearly an adult, but one whose accent and language could not be placed, and yet there was a familiarity there, one that rang a bell deep in her unconscious mind. Will mumbled in a barely human voice:

"He's in labour, Beverly."

"What? You're *not* serious."

"He was induced this morning," said Will. "It's a home birth. I – I'm no expert, but I think the baby is on his way . . . it could be a matter of an hour . . . maybe less, maybe minutes . . . I – I'm sorry, Beverly. I'm sorry . . . *he* knows . . . I couldn't – I couldn't just –"

The line went dead. Beverly pulled it slowly back from her ear, while she stared at the screen with his number in clear view, before – finally – the device went black into stand-by mode, and there was only a share collective holding of breath, as no one dared to speak. Beverly cursed. Brian spun around so his back was to them, as he buried his face into his hands. The board loomed over them, with the information messy and chaotic, and Jimmy awkwardly busied himself tidying its contents, while Beverly rammed her phone into her pocket.

"You two call Jack. Get over to Hannibal's place." Beverly winced. "I'm going to go check out the house with some back-up, just in case Miriam has been stashed there . . . there's every chance she's one of his last victims. I don't know if she was the one the police saw, maybe it was Abigail or Bedelia or God knows who, but someone – *someone* – is there posing as Murasaki."

"Will . . . Will told Hannibal everything," whispered Jimmy. "He did, didn't he? It doesn't matter at this point whether he was in on the crimes, became in on the crimes, or *will* become in on the crimes, because . . . because his loyalty is to the man that betrayed us all."

"Wait, *what*?" Brian spat. "So – So what now? They're going on the run?"

"Well, he will do," mumbled Beverly. "Once the labour is over. . ."

Brian stared with wide eyes. He opened and closed his mouth in an attempt to speak, until Jimmy put a hand on his shoulder and shook his head, and soon Brian fisted his hands and clenched his jaw, before – finally – letting out a loud '*fuck'* and kicking hard at a stool. It went hurtling across the floor, where it toppled over with a clatter against the tiles. Jimmy froze. He was still half-turned and angled towards Brian, with his hand slightly raised at his side as if reaching for his partner, and his other hand . . . still trembling . . . half-clutched at a photograph of Miriam.

"You guys go get Will," said Beverly.

Beverly grabbed at her bag and coat; the rush to pull them on led to some awkwardness, as her arm continually went into the wrong hole, and – with a curse – soon it was abandoned on her work-station, so she could run towards the laboratory doors. The door gave a loud slam

with the force it was thrown open. Jimmy jumped. Beverly spun around with an apologetic wince, as she threw her handbag over her shoulder and paused at the door to swear to them:

“I’ll go find Miriam . . .”

Chapter 22

"Everyone in position?"

Beverly held tightly to the microphone on her lapel. It practically brushed against her lips, as she leaned against the doorframe just out of sight from the peep-hole, and her free hand rested on the loose holster of her gun, ready to be drawn without hesitation. The earpiece was uncomfortable against her skull. The bullet-proof vest was heavy on her smaller frame. Each breath escaped her in a small cloud, visible as white mist against the inky black of night. The cold pierced through her gloves and jacket, bringing goose-bumps against her flesh; it stung at the back of her throat.

'Ready to go on command,' called a voice.

'All exits and entrances covered.'

Beverly drew in a deep breath. It scratched at her throat all the more, like icy claws raking down sensitive flesh on every inhalation, and her nose – red and swollen – streamed from the freezing temperatures, forcing her to sniff in a way that ruined her 'tough' image. Beverly let her eyes move among the trees and clearing . . . *red laser points darting around the windows* . . . *barely visible faces poking out from behind bark* . . . her mouth ran dry, as her tongue grew heavy and struggled to form the needed words. Her heart raced. She closed her eyes, as she called back:

"Okay, then let's do this."

The hand on her microphone dropped. It clenched tightly, as it paused just an inch from the front door, and – holding her breath – Beverly hammered hard with all her strength. The sound echoed out all around the grounds, while deafening likely whoever was inside. A pause. There was no sign of a response from inside . . . no replies, no footsteps, no movement . . . Beverly let loose her held breath and hammered again, this time for longer and with more force.

"FBI," cried Beverly. "Open up!"

A few footsteps were heard. They were light and slow, like someone having just awoken, and there was little urgency that came from knowing that the FBI were desperately seeking entry, but instead a passivity as if greeting a delivery man with evening dinner. Beverly waited. The footsteps came ever closer, while her heart raced with such force that it became audible enough to drown out all other sounds, and her breath left her in short pants. The door opened . . .

Beverly spun around with gun raised. It aimed at a head. The woman in the doorway barely registered surprised or concern, as she raised a hand to cover her eyes, and – with a curse – Beverly turned off the flashlight on her chest, stopping the blinding light in its tracks. The woman was dressed in a simple white nightdress, which was loose and fell to her ankles, and her blonde hair was also loose about her shoulders, as if just woken from bed. Beverly noted

her strikingly blue eyes, along with an arm that was clearly amputated just above the elbow . . .

"*Miriam*," gasped Beverly.

The gun slowly lowered, as Beverly stood open mouthed. There was no blood or dirt on the dressing gown, while her hair looked clean and well-brushed, and the exposed skin was free from any wounds or scars . . . *healthy weight, good complexion* . . . Beverly knitted together her eyebrows, as she brought her gun to her chest. A quick look behind Miriam spoke of no other known occupants, while the house looked spotless. Beverly croaked out:

"Are you hurt? Injured? Sick?"

Miriam shook her head.

"Okay, I need you to come with me."

Beverly gently extended a hand. Miriam hesitated. A visible tremble overtook her remaining limbs, complete with a speckling of goose-bumps over her skin, and she instinctively took a slow step back away from the door. Beverly shot out a whispered '*no'*, before offering her hand again and providing a warm – yet forced – smile. This time, Miriam reacted. The hand was taken and Beverly carefully escorted Miriam outside, towards an open police car.

The lights were on in the interior, with the radiator on full blast. Beverly guided Miriam to the front passenger seat, where she carefully sat her down and gave her a quick once-over, before – with a wave of her hand – signalling to the waiting men to descend. A charged *'go, go, go'* bellowed out from a distance. Miriam cried out . . . *hand over ears, hunched over* . . . Beverly stood before her to block out the sight of dozens of agents swarming through the house, where they moved with rapid speed and professionalism. She knelt down. A hand rested on a knee.

Miriam tensed. A visible intake of breath preceded a hiss. Beverly struggled to make eye-contact, as she fought back years of experience and education . . . *various statistics, witness testimonies, victim statements* . . . life in captivity was always a fate worse than death for omegas, but the one piece of hope was that Hannibal was not like other captors. Beverly rapidly blinked, while her lip trembled and her eyes watered. It was difficult to form words, as she choked out:

"I – I'm Beverly Katz. You – You won't know me, but I work with Jack . . . Jack Crawford?"

"Is – Is Jack here? Can I – Can I see him?"

"He – He's not here right now, no," sighed Beverly. "We can call him, though. I just need my men to make a clean sweep of the house . . . check for other survivors, check for threats . . . when we have the all-clear, we'll bring Jack here and a forensic team to scour for evidence. We have a paramedic on the way; they should have met us here, but you know how it goes . . ."

"I'm sorry I failed him . . . I failed J-Jack and –"

“Hey, he never stopped looking for you, Miriam. We must have exhausted every avenue! Have you – Have you been here all this time?” Beverly sniffed. “Why – Why didn’t you call someone? Why didn’t you escape? Is there someone else in there with you? Were you kept hostage?”

“Do you – Do you always interrogate heavily disorientated victims?”

A vague half-smile broke over Miriam. The sway to her head caused Beverly to look closer, where she spotted blown pupils that struggled to focus, and – taking her wrist – a quick heartbeat led to one quick assumption: *she had been drugged.* Beverly winced. A quick dart to the boot of the car allowed her to grab some blankets and water, before darting back to wrap Miriam warmly in the soft fabric and push the plastic bottle into her hand. Miriam held it well, albeit held the base against her thigh, but a visible tremble caused the contents to ripple.

“You still have a sense of humour,” teased Beverly.

“How’d you know I had a sense of humour before?” Miriam whispered. “I doubt Jack listed ‘humour’ as one of my top qualities . . . then again, never really had much of a sense of humour himself, did he? He always kept saying that I’d always face discrimination in the bureau, that an omega was at an instant disadvantage, and so I needed to be serious, I needed to –”

“Not just be as good as the alphas, but *better* than the alphas.”

“Yeah. I mean, I always knew that if I screwed up it’d be ‘because’ I was an omega, and that it’d make the path for other omegas after me ten times harder, but equally if I did anything right -? You could always bet there’d be an alpha to take credit. I – I used to hate the jokes about my heat when I’d get testy at one of them, and I’d hate how they’d make comments about my body, as if it was somehow a ‘flirtation’ and not harassment, but if I could go back -? I – I almost miss it.”

“Almost?” Beverly swallowed hard, as she forced a smile. “It had to be pretty bad to make living with a serial killing cannibal a preferable thing. You’re safe now, though. You can take some time off, maybe get a prosthetic arm fitted, and I bet you’ll be back at work in no time. Hell, with what you survived, you’ll no longer be ‘just’ an omega . . . you’ll be a *hero*.”

Miriam flinched. The grimace distorted her smile, turning it into something dark. The blue eyes narrowed, while nostrils flared and lips pursed into a thin line, and her hand tightened around the plastic bottle, until it crinkled and crackled. A shiver ran through her form, until her spine stiffened and she sat bolt upright. The tension in her muscles caused her veins to bulge, while the tendons on her hands raised like ropes, and Beverly averted her gaze, unable to make eye-contact, as she whispered a brief: *‘sorry’*. A voice came out over her earpiece:

‘Hey, the house is clear.’

Beverly climbed to her feet. A few agents were patrolling the perimeter, while a police dog barked in the distance, and inside there were visible figures stalking about, each one carefully opening various cupboards and checking beneath tables and beds. They were slowly making

their way back downstairs, with many heading outside towards vehicles and shelter. Beverly stayed close to Miriam. A hand remained pressed to the roof of the car, while she brought her microphone back up to her mouth, and angled her body to the side to whisper:

"What did you guys find?"

'There's two used bedrooms and bathrooms,' said the agent. *'I want to say that it looks like two young women lived here, but can't tell the dynamics. It also looks like the master bedroom housed a third person, but it's so spotless that I'd guess they weren't here often . . . just a few essentials in a drawer, a few basic toiletries on a shelf, that sort of thing . . .'*

"Age? Sex? Dynamic?"

'The clothes look male. I'd guess the guy's an omega, but a much older one. The bathroom cabinet has a lot *of fertility drugs and hormones, like the same stuff my wife took when we were trying to conceive, and there's a lot of pregnancy vitamins, too.'*

"Alright, come on out. We wait for forensics to investigate."

'Right, will do, Ms Katz.'

A cold sweat broke over Beverly . . . *'fertility drugs'* . . . *'trying to conceive'* . . . the weight of the vest caused her blouse to cling to her skin, so that it pulled and tugged uncomfortably with every movement, and her armpits were soaked with visible stains. She pulled at her collar, as she tried to gain some extra air, before spinning around with hands tented to her mouth. A few tears pricked at her eyes, as her cold prophecies from the past burst into memory . . . *'traps you into a relationship'* . . . Beverly locked eyes with Miriam, as she asked in a quiet voice:

"Why did he take you, Miriam?"

"I – I think it was because he knew."

"He knew what?"

"He knew that I realised he was a monster."

A stray tear broke from her eyes. It was small and slow, running down over her pale cheek with a silvery trail, and it was the first sign of vulnerability since her rescue, as Miriam tilted her head to look back at Beverly with a broken smile. Beverly knelt back down. The distance between them was enough to provide the illusion of space, but close enough that immediate first-aid or comfort could be provided if needed, and Beverly – swallowing back a painful lump – met Miriam's smile with one of her own, even as both dared not to make eye-contact.

"I was investigating my own list of names," said Miriam. "It was all under-the-radar, as I wasn't really supposed to be investigating alone, and Jack wasn't supposed to give me permission . . . he didn't, not really, but we had a sort of unspoken agreement. I wanted answers. He wanted answers. I was willing to do what it took to help him, because helping him was to help us with the case of the Chesapeake Ripper. I had no hesitations.

“Hannibal Lecter was top of my list, so I went there after a fashion. I can’t quite remember what order I tackled the list of names, but I must have had some logic to it . . . I remember how he invited me into his office and how *nice* he was to me. He made it a point not to treat me like a trainee, but like I was a full-fledged agent. He complemented me on my deductions, thanked me for breaking a glass ceiling for other omegas, and he was an omega, too . . . I – I admired him, because he’d done so well in life and stood out in an all alpha field.

“You know, I don’t think his name even made the official list of suspects. It was like everyone wrote him off for being an omega, just like how people used to write people off for being women, like how a woman or omega could never commit a crime. I think that’s part of why I was drawn to his name, like I almost *wanted* it to be him, because I wanted to smash the mould so hard that maybe we could finally redefine criminal psychology . . . maybe catch new killers, solve cold cases . . . I mean, in the end, I was almost *disappointed* to realise he wasn’t the Ripper . . .

“But that’s when I made the mistake of talking with him about the Copycat Killer.” Miriam winced. “We got talking about it in some detail, and he was so friendly and non-assuming, I just sort of spilled everything to him . . . like he was a friend. He went to fetch some old diaries for me, which is when I looked around his office. I found an old sketch-book of his . . . flicked through the pages . . . I was hit hard by how good an artist he was, but then . . .”

“Then what?”

“Then I saw it . . . a sketch of the ‘wound man’. It was like – It was like something just *clicked*, because that was the latest kill of the Copycat Killer, who was emulating someone or other . . . I wish I could say who, but my mind is – it’s . . . anyway, I saw it and I knew – *I knew* – that this was the sketch of a man who fit the profile of the Copycat Killer to perfection, and that I needed to get away from him as soon as possible, and as my head was spinning -? He strangled me.”

Miriam brought a hand to her throat. There were no visible scars or marks, with the skin looking otherwise perfect, but she rubbed with such force that soon the skin turned a violent shade of pink that spoke of an almost compulsive need to rub away the memory itself. Beverly reached towards her hand, but Miriam flinched . . . a low gasp escaped her lips . . . wide eyes stared hard at Beverly, with pupils darting all over the place with a sharp shimmer. Beverly yanked back her hand and raised them in mock surrender, while Miriam rushed out in a single breath:

“When I woke up, I was in this house.”

Miriam shivered.

“I spent time alternating between here and some well,” she continued. “It was a form of torture, like he was breaking me down in the well and offering me comfort here to rebuild me, and – just to keep things varied – he’d . . . *drug me*. I would remember flashing lights and some sort of hypnosis, and photographs of a man . . . I started to think Hannibal was my saviour for a while.”

“Like . . . brain-washing?”

“Yeah,” choked Miriam. “It was only some months ago that it stopped. He brought home a young woman, someone called ‘Abigail’, and he asked me to help look after her, even though – really – I got the impression she was there to look after me, or maybe we were to look after each other . . . I didn’t dare run at that point. I was scared he would kill her if I ran. There was no phones here, no Internet, and I saw maps . . . I’d never have made it on foot to another person.

“You know what’s weird? He was so nice . . . even when he took my arm, *he was so nice*! He apologised, before he put me to sleep, and afterwards he’d drop by to make sure my aftercare was immaculate, like he was worried in case something bad would happen to me. He said that originally he wanted to frame someone . . . Childs, Chilton . . . something like that . . .”

“He was going to frame Chilton? He told you this?”

“He made me make some recordings. I remember one from early on, where I was begging Jack for help, and he promised he would send it . . . wanted to taunt Jack . . . no idea if or when he ever kept his word, but I had to make more recordings over time. I don’t even know if he always meant to frame Chilton, or who he meant to frame instead . . . if anyone . . .

“I just know that he took my arm, said he ‘had no other choice’. He came by a week or two ago, too, which is when I started to lose hope . . . he took my freedom, he took my arm, and then he took the only companion I had for all my time in this house. He took Abigail. I – I thought he would kill me when he took her, but he just said . . . he just said that it seemed *rude* to kill me, when I had only been doing my job and had always been so polite to him. It seemed *rude*.”

A broken laugh spilled from her mouth. It was a muffled and strange sound, one that drifted in and out of an audible range, before the laughter died away . . . it grew into a stifled chuckle, with lips pressed into a thin line . . . finally, it made way for something worse. Miriam wept. The sobs wracked through her entire frame, until she was hunched over with her arm pressed hard into her stomach, and tears streamed down her cheeks, as soon cries became retches and retches became gagging that threatened to turn into a vomiting fit. Beverly said in a quiet voice:

“Miriam, I –”

“Mr Katz! This is urgent!”

Beverly ran a hand over her face. She stood and turned to see an agent running towards them, where he waved his hand in a frantic manner, and Beverly spat into her microphone for a medic, while she chanced a few steps away from Miriam to meet him halfway in his journey. He stopped dead in front of her, with his hands still on his gun. He looked between her and the house a few times, before finally nodding an acknowledgement to Beverly, and scratching the back of his neck with a lazy hand, as he stared down at the ground to avoid her stare.

“They have a full freezer,” mumbled the agent.

“Yeah? So? They had to eat somehow.”

“Yeah, that’s the thing.” He sighed. “The evidence pointed to cannibalism, right? The Copycat Killer and Jigsaw Killer were taking organs, yeah? Well, some of these look . . . they look like human organs. In fact, they even seem to have *labels*. We didn’t touch anything, but they’re so neatly organised that they might as well be a fucking confession! It – It’s insane.”

Beverly let out a loud *‘fuck’*. The flashing lights of a siren flickered between the trees, as an ambulance swung into the clearing and parked at a safe difference from the house, and Beverly – caught between victim, agent, and paramedics – let loose a long groan, before waving her hands high above to catch the eye of the paramedics. They came out quickly, with a thick bag each that was overflowing with medical equipment, and darted in a strange walk-run fashion towards the police vehicle that she pointed towards. Beverly met them at the vehicle.

They asked for space, giving Beverly her cue to leave, but a hand shot out towards her wrist. It caught her by surprised and jolted her to a complete stop, while long fingers wrapped around the skin with a hold so hard that it left visible imprints on her flesh. Miriam was perched on the edge of her seat, almost half-dragged out of the car by the force of which Beverly had pulled away in her attempts to get back to her men. Miriam rushed out in a single breath:

“Do you know a Will Graham?”

Beverly turned slowly. The blood ran cold in her veins, as she pried away Miriam’s fingers and brought her hand to her chest, where she cradled the bruising flesh with a rub of her free hand, and Miriam – staring at her with wide eyes – allowed the paramedics to do their jobs, as they took various vitals and looked her over. They may as well have not been there at all, as Miriam allowed them to move and position her like a broken marionette, and she paid them no mind while ever fixated upon Beverly. Beverly bit into her lip, before she asked:

“Wh-What about him?”

“I think all of this was for him,” choked Miriam. “Not the Copycat Killings, but all of the Jigsaw Killings for sure . . . Will was all he talked about . . . an equal, a friend, a companion . . . I got the impression that the plan was to somehow win Will over, run away with him, start a family together with the baby to tie him to Will. Will wouldn’t leave him with a baby.”

“I – I thought . . . I thought the same thing, too.”

“Yeah, but he thinks Will *betrayed* him. He was talking about how Will was working with the police and bureau, how Will was investigating him and planned to turn him in, and how – sure – Will’s conflicted now, but the fact remains he would have gladly seen him behind bars . . .”

Miriam closed her eyes, when she opened them she said calmly:

“I’m scared he might hurt Will.”

A dizzy spell struck at Beverly. It nearly knocked her from her feet, as she stumbled back a few steps towards the centre of the clearing, and pushed back the agent in the process, before

tumbling towards her car on the other side of the clearing. A few voices called out to her, drowned out by her racing heartbeat and cacophony of background noises, and finally – with all the strength she possessed – she threw herself into the driving seat and fumbled around the glove compartment. The mobile phone soon came into sight. Beverly snatched it away.

It took several tries to unlock the device. Each time her fingers stabbed at the keys, they would tremble and shake so much that different numbers would be entered than intended, and – when a warning finally threatened to lock her out – she drew in a deep breath and forced herself to move slowly to type in the code. Finally, she was able to dial the number for 'Will Graham' . . . it rang out once . . . twice . . . Beverly screwed shut her eyes, holding back tears . . . thrice . . . four times . . . five . . . finally, the call went through to voice-mail.

Beverly screamed until her voice grew hoarse:

"*Fuck*!"

Chapter 23

Hannibal screamed.

It was a primal sound. It ripped through the room with great volume and bass, so that it became akin to the roar of a wounded animal, and it followed through until the breath escaped him, where it finally died as a series of pants and groans. A few specks of saliva marked the stubble of his chin, as his head dropped back against the thick pillows. The hair was mussed. A visible sweat broke over his flesh, with a single drop trickling over a throbbing temple.

He lay back on the king-sized bed, with his legs pulled high to his chest. The first time Will made a joke about the position, a cold glare had been thrown his way, but the second time a joke was made about the position, a vase on the bedside table was aimed toward his head. A sheet ran over his knees, which kept his modesty during the birthing process. The shirt and waistcoat were slicked close to his skin, with the white of the sleeves almost translucent in places, so that it gave the illusion of being the same colour as skin. Will knelt between his knees.

The sight was unlike anything in imagination. The hole was stretched wide beyond reason, with a solid and slightly curved mass peaking its way out of the opening, and – behind all the mucus and membranes – Will saw what seemed to be blond hair. It was slicked and thin, like something from another world or from another creature, but it was there . . . he carefully brushed his fingers against the edge of the hole, while Hannibal screamed out through another contraction.

“I – I think I can see the head,” choked Will.

He fought for breath, as he chanced a look over the sheet. Hannibal was both broken and beautiful, as he writhed through agony without any pain relief, and his hands were still clenched beneath his knees, so that his body was nearly bent in half. Will fought back a trembling lip, as tears threatened to spill down his cheeks. A part of him longed to comfort his partner. He edged from leg to leg, as his eyes moved from babe to man, and his heart raced fast in his chest, as his hands shook beyond his control at the stretching hole. He stared down. His eyes widened.

“You need to support the head,” gasped Hannibal.

“Is – Is that it? I just hold him?”

“D-Do not pull, but simply h-hold him, yes.”

Will tried to place his hands beneath. They shook. The blood and mucus stuck to his fingers, which fought for purchase, before – with a curse – he looked up to see the contorted face of Hannibal . . . *a sharp grimace, flared nostrils, teeth exposed* . . . where the bravery and perseverance came from was a mystery, but nothing short than a small miracle. Will nodded. A tear ran down his cheek, as he took in a deep breath and briefly closed his eyes.

He reopened his eyes to see still hands. They slowly went beneath and around the head, which pushed its way from the opening hole with a slow emergence, and finally – with a stream of words in some other tongue – the head was out . . . *it was out*. A soft laugh fell from Will. It was barely recognisable as his voice. He felt the head of his son, while the ring of the hole seemed to contract a little with the lack of pressure, and soon there was speed . . . everything moved beyond the pace of the previous hours. The shoulders took Will by surprise. He spluttered. He stuttered.

A sentence tumbled from Hannibal's lips, heavy in an accent so thick that it could barely be understood: *'angle him carefully towards my stomach'*. Will fought to obey. He darted his eyes rapidly to and fro, while his mind went blank, and the baby was a struggle to hold . . . *slippery, wet, smooth* . . . his fingers refused purchase. The baby nearly slipped out of his hands several times, although he quickly caught it with Hannibal none the wiser, and finally – with one last earth-shattering cry of torture – the baby slid fully out into waiting hands.

Hannibal half-sobbed and half-laughed; he muttered two words over and over in a Slavic tongue, while his hands fell limp from his knees, and – collapsing back against the sheets – his body grew limp and lifeless, while he panted and cursed and sniffed through tears. Will struggled to lay the baby in a swaddling cloth, as his eyes raked over a red little creature with ten toes and ten fingers . . . so small . . . far smaller than anything in movies or shows. Will choked out:

"He – He's not making any noise. Is he – Is he okay?"

"Hand him to me," whispered Hannibal. "Do – Do you know that they used to hold the newborn infant upside-down and slap his buttocks? H-He should only need skin-to-skin contact and f-for his face to be wiped clean . . . warmth is – is most important . . ."

Will struggled to climb from the mattress. He came around the bed with the baby held in his hands, not his arms, and offered it forth almost like a sacrifice to an awaiting God, while Hannibal – eyes half-lidded, face deathly white – took him with a gentle hold. It was instinctual. It was the hold of a parent that had been through immense and unthinkable anguish, only for something beautiful to be born from the pain . . . like an angel . . . like a phoenix . . .

A gentle hand used the end of the swaddling cloth to wipe the face. The baby pulled a strange expression, one that reminded Will of himself when touched without consent, and he contorted and squirmed to get away from the cloth on his cheeks, even as Hannibal cradled him close to his chest with a perfect hold. The baby cried. It was a strange wail, one that came on and off without real signs of distress, and tiny fists moved back and forth, while eyes screwed shut. Will wept. A burst of emotion slowed his heart, as adrenaline finally made way for endorphins.

"The umbilical cord," said Will. "Do we need to –?"

"In ordinary circumstances, I would say to leave it until help arrives."

"But as you're a doctor, you'll cut it now?"

Hannibal waved a lazy hand to the bedside table. The baby was slowly quietening, as Hannibal bounced him in one arm and stroked at his cheek with a long finger, and half-sung an old lullaby in a language that was rarely heard. Will obediently handed him a clip and sterilised pair of medical scissors. Hannibal moved quickly. The speed was enough that Will failed to see as the umbilical cord was clamped and cut, and only noticed when the tools were handed back to him, while Hannibal deftly swaddled the baby until only his face was visible, before he said:

"The placenta will usually be delivered within the next twenty minutes."

"And do I need to anything? Or do we just –?"

"D-Do not be alarmed to see a gush of blood," murmured Hannibal. "I will push when I feel the urge, and – with luck – it should all go well . . . do not – I must emphasise this: *do not* – try to deliver or interfere with the process. The most dangerous part is the delivery of the placenta, but I – I am sure that Beverly will have sent for paramedics in case I need medical intervention."

"She'll have sent more than that . . . you know that, I know that . . ."

"Hmm, just let me rest, Will. Let me enjoy this limited time. I am simply glad that our son was not born in prison or worse . . . I thought of him as Misha Lecter-Graham . . . it is a good name, the name of one that has united us . . . the name of one that came before him . . ."

Hannibal closed his eyes, where they flitted behind his eyelids. He looked so at peace, with Mischa clutched to his chest wrapped in hand-me-down cloths from his childhood, as the sheets seemed to mould themselves to now outstretched legs. There was a scent of iron and sweat in the bedroom, while the sheets were beyond saving from their soiled nature. The soft breaths from Hannibal made Mischa rise and fall. Will smiled, as he stole a quick photograph.

He pushed his phone back into his pocket. The notification for the 'missed call' shoved to the back of his mind, as he slowly slid his hands beneath Mischa. He was so soft . . . so small, so light . . . Will was able to take him with little effort, while Hannibal's arms folded over his still slightly swollen stomach and rested with clasped hands. The little lips were plump. The cheeks were round. Mischa briefly opened his eyes . . . hazel and dark, just like Hannibal . . . Will laughed, as he choked out a hoarse: *'hey there, little guy'*. He bounced Mischa in turn.

The phone rang. Will ignored it, as he stared into the eyes of the most beautiful child alive. The sense of awe that washed over him was indescribable, like a wash of warm water slowly over bared skin, and his muscles loosened and fell soft, like crawling into a soft bed after a long day. He refused to take his eyes from Mischa. Hannibal stirred from the bed, where he pushed himself into a sitting position, but it was background noise . . . this was his son . . . his *baby* . . . tears filled his eyes, as he held Mischa as tight as he dared. He breathed deep his scent.

"They're coming," choked Will.

“Do you still plan for me to run alone?” Hannibal laughed. “Do you mean for us to run together? I imagine we still have time . . . time to decide, time to flee . . . I wonder sometimes whether you always meant for it to come down to this . . . exactly as Jack planned. You get to keep our child, while I am thrown out of the picture. He is your son. He is yours alone.”

“What? *No*. He’s our son, Hannibal. We made him together . . .”

“Did we? You were quite vocal that you consider our union to be ‘rape’. I stole from you a seed that I used to create a child without your consent . . . I grew him until he moved from ‘foetus’ to ‘baby’ . . . he – he is beautiful, is he not? I always hoped that we would create a home together, where we would raise him alongside our daughter in a home we made for ourselves . . .

“You were always conflicted, however. You saw no place for both him and myself in your world, especially when you lost Abigail and blamed me for her loss . . . and so you conspired against me with Jack . . . you – you even entertained the notion of taking my son from me . . .”

“It was only for a moment, but you – . . . you took my daughter from *me* . . .”

“Ah, tit for tat? Is that it, Will? You considered ‘revenge’?”

Hannibal laughed again. It was a rumbling sound at odds with his cries, and Will – stepping back away from the bed – wrapped an arm full around Mischa, as if by cradling him that he could somehow block out the sounds of the outside world. His heart raced. It was a steadily increasing beat within his breast, one that stole at his breath and cloyed in his throat, and Will dropped his gaze from those cold eyes to the blood that stained the sheets. The placenta was likely on its way, while Hannibal grimaced as if through a lighter contraction. Hannibal spat out:

“I always suspected that it would come to this . . . that you would take Mischa.”

“I – I changed my mind. I want . . . I want us to go *with* you.”

“As you reminded me when Abigail left our lives, wanting to change time is not enough to change time itself . . . a teacup once shattered cannot be pieced back together. In time, as with *kintsugi*, it may be salvaged and made more beautiful than ever before, but for now the pieces lay broken. They are broken as you betrayed me in exchange for a betrayal. How ironic.”

Hannibal let loose a guttural cry. He hunched forward, until he collapsed as the cry reached its conclusion, and – with heavy pants – he slowly forced himself into a sitting position, while he pushed the dirty and used sheets down to cover whatever lay beneath. Will stepped back again, as he cast his eyes briefly to the window. The rain outside hammered against the panes. It was a familiar and rhythmic thud, one that could have lulled him to sleep at any other point, and instead it covered his footsteps, as he lingered in the doorway. Hannibal said through laughter:

“You planned to take my son . . . I planned to take your daughter.”

A half-smile broke across Hannibal. It brought lines to the corners of his eyes, eyes that were half-narrowed and stared with an unflinching focus, and his lips barely hid a low chuckle. He raised his legs enough to form a small tent. He leaned forward. It was a casual pose, one at odds with his usual graceful demeanour, and his forearms rested on knees, before he purposefully looked up to the ceiling. He held his stare. He moved his eyes back to Will. He grinned.

Will ran.

He held tight to Mischa, as he stumbled and raced to the attic door. Every few steps, Will would look behind to see if anyone followed . . . anyone lingered, moved, watched . . . the hallway stayed empty and desolate, while he clutched Mischa close. He stopped. The adrenaline returned in a cold rush, as sparks of colour burst about his vision, and his body swayed even as his arms remained rigidly locked around his son. His feet remained locked into place, even as he eyed the staircase that led to the attic room that was so rarely used, and he yelled in a high-pitched voice:

"Abigail? *Abigail*, answer me!"

Silence. Will took in a deep and shuddered breath. He shot his eyes back to the bedroom, where he heard another low groan and panted breaths, and a rustle of fabric like the used sheets being discarded, while his heart started to drown out the various sounds from Hannibal. He hopped from foot to foot, while his teeth dug deep into his lip. A spark of pain burst out, as he tasted something metallic on his tongue, and – with a weak keening sound – he dragged his feet into the stairwell and climbed into the attic. The door to the room was open.

The room was dark, enough that it hid the paleness to his cheeks. He darted his eyes from object to object, corner to corner, where – lying on a *chaise longue*, before the huge window – a long and thin person lay limp and lifeless on the soft cushions. A head of brown hair was titled almost unnaturally to the side, while an arm dangled with the hand flat upon the floor. The last piece of hope died inside Will. He choked on the bile that spilled over his tongue. Tears spilled.

"No," cried Will. "No, no, no!"

He made to move his hands to his face. The twitching lips pulled into a mockery of a smile, as his head jerked to and fro, and his nose streamed along with his eyes, while he stumbled back against the door-frame for balance. He choked on the air. Mischa stirred with the jerking and unnatural movements, and his cry . . . innocent, afraid . . . sparked something from within Abigail . . . *Abigail* . . . Abigail whose fingers curled and wrist turned.

Will gasped. The tears stopped. He watched with heart fit to burst, as slowly limbs moved inch by inch and eyes opened with fluttering eyelids, and soon she was sitting upright, with hands holding onto the edge of the *longue.* The moonlight behind her was distorted by the rivulets of raindrops that ran down the windowpane, casting strange and ever moving silvery shadows from behind her, like an ethereal and unnatural aura . . . he screwed shut his eyes, he opened them again . . . she was still there. Abigail was still there, even as she whispered:

“Did – Did I miss the birth?”

He dropped to his knees. A sharp pain shot through his legs, matched only by the rush of relief, and pain and pleasure mingled as one, while tears streamed down his cheeks . . . broken cries escaped his hoarse throat, while his shoulders and stomach freed themselves of all tension . . . he hunched forward with Mischa held close. The world went white around him. A bone-deep fatigue struck at every nerve and muscle. He sobbed over Mischa, even as Abigail walked towards him and dropped down before him. He struggled to lift his head. He fought to meet her eyes. A hand came out to touch his shoulder, where it squeezed with a light touch.

“Hey, what’s happened?” Abigail asked. “Where’s Hannibal?”

“He – He induced labour.” Will clenched Mischa close. “I told him . . . I told him that I’d told Jack everything, and how Beverly was working to convict him . . . he spent the time after that ‘tying up loose ends’. He induced the labour early. This – This is our son! This is Mischa . . .”

“He’s beautiful,” whispered Abigail.

“I delivered him myself. He – He told me that you were up here . . . that he was going to take you from me . . . I thought he’d *killed* you! I thought he’d -!” Will laughed. “How can you kill a dead woman? I saw you so often . . . I sometimes thought you were there . . . I blamed myself, I blamed Hannibal . . . I thought I’d never see you again! He – He gave you back to me . . .”

“I think that was his plan . . . but his plan changed when yours did . . .”

“You mean he was going to *kill* you?” Will winced. “I can imagine . . . let me guess, he would have taken a knife and ran it across your throat, leaving me to watch you die while my son cries in my arms . . . maybe he’d stab me for good measure, leave me with a physical scar . . .”

The laughter returned low and dark. He looked into her eyes, unsure whether the laughter belonged to him or her, but her lips twitched between smiles and grimaces, as if he were looking into a mirror . . . little jerks of the mouth, widening of the nostrils . . . her eyes were wet with tears, as realisation dawned on them both at the same moment. If there had been time, this would have been a goodbye . . . he intended her to be his last victim. Will silently moved his lips into an *‘I’m sorry’*, while she fell limply onto her buttocks and sat cross-legged. Abigail whispered:

“Do you know what really gets me?”

Will stayed silent. He chanced a look behind him, where the door was still open. It kicked shut with relative ease, where the mechanism clicked loud enough for Mischa to stir, and – lightly bouncing and hushing his son – Will turned to angle his body, so that both Abigail and the door remained in view at once. Mischa was so warm in his arms. Each murmur brought a smile, even as his stomach churned with a gut-wrenching pain, and he brought his son close enough to lay a soft kiss on his forehead. He stole a look to Abigail and asked:

“What gets you?”

“What gets me is that he said killing me wouldn’t be ‘personal’.”

The smile this time was sincere. It gave colour to her cheeks, as she rolled her eyes and looked to Will with a tilt of her head, and Will – shaking his head in turn – burst into laughter. It was contagious. The sound was matched by Abigail, who half-covered her mouth with her hand and wiped at her eyes to remove leftover tears. It was a cacophony that broke through the patter of raindrops and the howl of wind, and the vibrations from his chest made Mischa stir and whine, until his sounds became a part of the din. The laughter on stopped dead when Will said:

“Thank God he misjudged how long labour would last.”

“Yeah . . . I – I don’t think I’d be here else . . .”

The words echoed around his mind: *‘I don’t think I’d be here else’*. Will cast his eyes back to the door, which remained firmly closed, and his ears twitched as he strained to hear past the storm outside, only to hear an odd silence that seemed at odds with the previous urgency. He took in a shuddered breath. A cold sweat broke over him, as his arms trembled and hands shook. Will bit deep into his lip, before he carefully pushed Mischa towards Abigail, who – with unsteady hands – struggled to hold him, as if it was the first baby she had ever held.

“Here,” choked Will. “Take Mischa.”

“Will? What did -?”

“Take him! *Take Mischa*!”

Mischa was finally in her arms. He instructed her to support the neck, while avoiding the soft spot, but his words were so rushed and mumbled that it was unknown how much she heard, and she was still calling after him even as he scrambled away. He crawled on all fours at first, before using the doorknob to support his weight and drag himself upright. The door was thrown wide open. Will tumbled through. He ran down the stairs so fast that he overbalanced, forcing him to continue his run as to stop would be to fall, but continued at great speed even as feet hit the floor.

He raced back to the bedroom. He threw open the doors. There was a sound of something in the distance . . . *wails of sirens, screeching of tires* . . . Will cast his eyes around the bedroom, but there was no sign of any life or any presence. The bed was empty. Will ran around to the *en suite*, where there was a puddle of blood and what he assumed to be the placenta, while towels and toiletries lay scattered about and a box of post-pregnancy sanitary products disturbed.

Will ran back to the dressing room; the sweat-soaked shirt and waistcoat lay abandoned, and a selection of empty coat-hangers lay beside them, with a large satchel missing that Hannibal usually kept hanging for work purposes. The safe was also ransacked. There was no room for fear . . . no room for anger, depression, or any other emotion . . . there was simply a cold numbness. He dragged his feet slowly to the window, where he forced himself to look down.

Hannibal stood alone by the road. He was dressed in an expensive suit and coat, with the satchel over one shoulder and a black umbrella in one hand to protect from the rain. There was a sharp bend to his left arm, which kept it hidden from Will with the angle he stood, and a strange hunch to his shoulder that instinctively had Will straining for a closer look. Hannibal stopped. He turned, as if sensing someone watching him, and – as he turned to crane his head upwards – the umbrella moved to hide the left side of his body. He looked up to Will and smirked.

"Hannibal," screamed Will. "*Hannibal, no*!"

Will tripped back, as he tried to move. He searched the room with his eyes, desperate for something . . . *anything* . . . before he caught movement through the pane of glass, as Hannibal strode down the road in the opposite direction to the sirens and screeches. Will pounded his hands on the glass . . . *'Hannibal! Hannibal, stop!'* . . . all his strength moved to his hands and arms, as the glass vibrated and cracked under the pressure. His voice ripped with the force of his cries, until he tasted blood and his cries grew inaudible. Hannibal vanished.

The glass finally shattered. It burst out like a rain of diamonds onto the stones below, while a burst of rain and wind blew inwards . . . his hair and clothes billowed out, while a sharp and tearing pain seared itself into the nerves of his hands . . . *blood* . . . the glass had shredded the skin on the sides of his hands and forearms. He stumbled over to the bed. He quickly applied a makeshift tourniquet of soiled sheets, while a familiar cry exploded into his consciousness. Abigail stood uncertain in the doorway. Mischa cried and fussed from within her arms.

"He needs his father," whispered Abigail.

Will furrowed his brow. The curtains flew out with wild and crazed movements, while the sirens exploded with flashing lights into the bedroom, and shouts and screams were heard outside, as officers and agents piled out of their vehicles . . . *'go, go, go'* . . . blood stained the sheets around his hands. It was a perfect mixture of both alpha and omega. He collapsed down onto his knees, while Mischa wept and wept for comfort . . . for love . . . Will choked out through laughter:

"Which father . . .?"

Epilogue

It was silent.

There was the usual background noise that came from museums . . . *stray coughs, odd footsteps* . . . *echoes of nothing* . . . still, there was nothing that spoke of life itself, like the conversations or laughter or complaints of the city beyond its walls. It was a stifled and controlled environment, something synthetic and unnatural, and – where should come calm introspection – there was only a tense feeling as if walking a high tightrope.

Will kept his head down, underneath the artificial lights. He placed gloved hands into the pockets of the expensive coat, while the scarf kept hidden part of the carefully groomed beard, and yet – despite the outfit, picked by thoughtful hands – he remained hunched as he walked. The attempt to remain inconspicuous only served to make him more conspicuous. A security guard followed some distance behind, always stopping whenever Will stopped. Will turned. He locked eyes with the guard, stood tall, and uttered the only words of Italian he knew: *'excuse me'*.

The guard flushed a dark shade of red, before muttering apologies in fluent Italian . . . *'-problem with Americans -', '-didn't realise you -'* . . . Will nodded along, as he schooled his expression into one that spoke of feigned comprehension. He waited for the guard to disappear through another gallery, before darting quickly through room to room, and finally stopped before a grand archway that led to a series of paintings that spoke of a different era. A cushioned bench stood centre of the room, where a man sat with his back to the archway.

There was a pushchair next to the bench. It was angled so that the child directly faced the man, which typically signalled an omega parent; omegas tended to favour seeing the child for direct comfort and communication, while alphas typically favoured the pushchair to face away in order to prevent an easy 'grab and dash'. The main sat in a suit with a subtle check-pattern, with blond-grey hair swept into a well-gelled style, and in his hands sat a sketchbook.

Will came and sat beside him.

The drawing was a perfect replica of the painting opposite them. It featured exquisite shading of Achilles and Patroclus, but there were subtle differences to Patroclus . . . wispy and curly brown hair sat atop a familiar face, one bearded and slightly unkempt . . . Will blushed. He hunched forward, with his hands now in his lap. Hannibal never once made eye-contact, as he kept his gaze equally spent between painting and picture, and his long fingers swept over the paper with speed and skill that spoke of familiarity and comfort. He whispered low to Will:

"Do you know what is ironic?"

Hannibal put down the pencil. He carefully folded his sketchbook. The action required him to sit back just a few inches, before he leaned forward to put his book into his satchel, and – as he leaned – it allowed for a perfect glimpse of a perfect girl . . . *brown locks, rosy cheeks*. A smile broke over Will, as his breath caught in his throat and a sigh escaped his lips. Will

quickly averted his gaze once Hannibal sat back, as he pretended not to have stared at the infant, and instead looked to the painting opposite, which became a shared focal point.

“I do not believe we ever used protection once,” said Hannibal. “I had assumed that – once you found me –that it might be *you* that was the one pregnant . . . I know that it is rare for alphas, especially the men, and that omega men have a low sperm count, but it was always a possibility despite the improbability. In one universe, you may have sat next to me eight-months pregnant.”

“Instead, I’m wondering when you were going to tell me that we had twins.”

“I bet you wish that you came to the second ultrasound now, hmm?”

“Actually, I wish that I’d paid more attention to the signs,” sighed Will. “You were *never* going to stay, not once you knew that I’d betrayed you to Jack, and I should have noticed after the birth the way you were hiding something . . . it was only when I saw you outside, hiding something in your arms, that I finally put two and two together . . . by that point -? You were gone.”

“I was gone, yes, but you always knew where I would be, did you not? I spoke often of the chapel, and I left you a present there . . . did you find it, Will? Did you find my heart? I gave it to you long ago, but you tossed it aside for your loyalties to the bureau. A shame.”

“Oh? Is this your latest attempt at manipulation?”

Will crossed his arms over his chest. He half-smirked in a teasing manner, as he turned his head to cast his eyes from ankles to head, and noted that Hannibal still refused to meet his eyes, even though his stern expression barely hid the restrained pain from perceived rejection. Will took off his gloves, pocketing them with a swift gesture. The scars on his hands were prominent. He angled them to press the sides to his thighs, as opposed to the palms, and tried to emulate a confident stance, while throwing back his shoulders a little too prominently.

“I’m not going to feel guilty, Hannibal,” said Will. “The fact remains that you allowed my encephalitis to run rampant, raped me, lied to me about everything, and then hid my daughter from me, making me to think that she was dead . . . most men wouldn’t have forgiven you.”

“I heard you in the catacombs. Am I the only one that must be forgiven?”

“No, but I can hardly plead my case or apologise with you a whole ocean away, can I? I sold up everything in America. I took Abigail and Mischa and travelled all over Europe, but I’ll admit that this was the last place I looked . . . I think a part of me wanted to understand you, maybe make amends to you . . . I wanted to *earn* my forgiveness first before I saw you.”

Will bit into his lip. He slid behind his coat, toward his belt. The callused fingers wrapped around the hilt of a knife, which was slowly slid out and placed between them, and it sat awkwardly between them, while Hannibal refused to make eye-contact. Will held his breath. He waited until the lack of response grew too much to bear, and pushed the knife until it disturbed the fabric of Hannibal’s trousers. Hannibal finally looked to the knife. Will nodded.

It quickly changed hands, as Hannibal placed it discretely inside his satchel and sat back upright.

“You were going to kill me,” said Hannibal.

“You would have tried to kill me, too, wouldn’t you?”

A half-smile broke over Hannibal. He cocked his head to look to Will, with his eyes half-narrowed with a dangerous glint, and his body angled itself toward him, but away from the baby that stirred in its expensive pink dress and matching tights. A strong blow struck at Will, like a physical punch to the gut, and his mouth opened with a high-pitched sigh, as he jerked towards the child before forcing himself to sit still beside his husband. Hannibal followed his gaze. He looked to the baby, before – with unusual mercy – pulling the pushchair around.

It exposed his left hand, where the ring on his finger still rested. The cobalt shone in the light, with a shimmer that moved as his hand moved, and it was no different than when they first exchanged rings nearly nine months ago to the date. The pushchair sat perfectly between them, before the brakes were put into place. Will reached to stroke a soft cheek. He paused. He looked to Hannibal who simply nodded, and continued with a bright smile to touch at his daughter.

The skin was soft and gentle, very much at odds with Mischa, who currently seemed intent on climbing and exploring and eating anything within sight, and – favouring outdoor play – his cheeks and lips often ran dry, despite all the lotions and creams. The girl gurgled and murmured, as she moved her head even in sleep to nuzzle against the touch. He laughed. Will glanced back to Hannibal, whose softened expression mirrored his own, and Will looked away with a deep blush once their eyes met again. Hannibal asked in a low voice:

“What made you change your mind?”

“Honestly?” Will smiled. “I think if Abigail had died, I may have tried to kill you. I think even understanding *why* you took her wouldn’t be enough to undo the damage, and I think killing you would have been like piecing the teacup back together again . . . what is it you called it? *Kintsugi*? A life for a life seems almost . . . biblical. I think you’d have appreciated it.”

“I would have appreciated the sentiment. I also know that Chiyoh would not allow me to come to harm, and I would have seen your act of attempted murder as an obvious ‘break up’. I will say now quite honestly, Will: no one has ever broken up with me before. It would have made sense to me to allow you the illusion of control, before breaking up with you on my own terms, which also would save my life. I would have killed you first. Of that, I can be certain.”

“Okay, so things could have gone very badly,” laughed Will.

“But they so far are going well,” said Hannibal. “What changed your mind?”

“It was Mischa.” Will smiled. “I left you a present back in Lithuania . . . I – I didn’t do it *for* you, not really, but I felt something primal and dark and after it was done -? I felt a little

closer to you, like I could understand how death and art, violence and beauty, could go hand in hand . . . I thought about how Mischa would learn about the world, about what he would think of such grotesque and sublime tableaus', and it came to me . . . like a bolt . . .

"If he grows up with just me, I think he'll lose that piece of you. It's the piece that I carry around with me, so much that I'm not even sure where I begin and you end, and it's a feeling . . . a feeling I think you felt all along. I know you wanted me to know what it was like . . . the thrill of the hunt, the beauty of blood . . . for a split second, I wanted to know that, too."

"You cannot let me go . . . I am a part of you."

A broad smile broke across Hannibal. It was almost a cue, as the small girl stirred and grumbled from within her seat, and – with whispered words of Lithuanian – Hannibal unstrapped her from the seat and brought him into his arms, where he rhythmically patted her back. It did little to lull her back into a sleep, as her small hands grabbed at his hair and tugged it until it fell out of place and dropped like a fringe before one eye. He glared at her. She giggled and lightly slapped at his cheek, until he blew raspberries at her and made her laugh all the more. Will whispered:

"Did you give her a name?"

He hated to disturb Hannibal at such a moment. It was rare to see him let go and drop his façade, especially to see him pulling faces and looking silly, but the question . . . *broken, quiet* . . . *uncertain* . . . needed to be asked. Hannibal slid the girl onto a sitting position on his lap, before he handed her a teething ring and let her play and babble and rock. Will stroked at her hair, which caught her attention, and soon she squealed and chatted to him with endless incoherent sounds that could make sense only to someone so innocent. A tear threatened to fall.

"I toyed with Wilhelmina," said Hannibal. "You were always so afraid of having a biological child, lest you abandon them as you were abandoned or pass onto them the traits you loathed about yourself, and you would have hated to be reminded on a daily basis that she was a part of you, as you would have hated looking that deeply into yourself. It was a strong temptation."

"You didn't . . . did you?"

"It *was* tempting, as you had hurt me deeply, but no." Hannibal sighed. "I named her Aldona Graham-Lecter, but – due to the necessity of an assumed identity here – she may be currently named as Aldona Fell, daughter of Roman and Lydia Fell."

A sharp exhale of breath expelled from flared nostrils. Will narrowed his eyes, even as his hand held tightly onto that of Aldona, so that she fought to pull it away to return her attentions back to her ring that was bounced up and down with clumsy gestures. He fought to control his heartbeat, as a sticky sweat struck underneath his armpits. His jaw ached. Will forced long and slow breaths, while looking between ring and daughter, before he forced his gaze away and stared hard at the painting in front of them. It took all his strength to say in a cold and monotone voice:

“About ‘Lydia’ –”

“I have no doubt that Lydia is currently acting the role of a drugged ‘victim’, while awaiting for the police – or worse – to arrive to take me into captivity. She has been leaving them hints . . . you would have noticed had you stayed within the bureau.”

“I’m sorry I came looking for the man I love,” muttered Will.

“Apology accepted,” teased Hannibal. “I know that Bedelia has sought to undermine me from the start; I allowed for her eccentricities as I believed it would lead you to me, but she was only ever a mere distraction . . . I thought I would cook her leg while wrapped in clay, a complex and theatrical meal for one complex and theatrical. I always envisioned an extra seat for you.”

“How romantic, I’d be your partner in crime.”

“I also thought about going back to America; I wanted to tend to some unfinished business, and tie up some loose ends, but after that -? Well, Paris would be a nice place to settle down. My uncle left me an old property that has changed names and deeds enough to be untraceable to our family name, and we would not stand out as we would in say Japan. I would like to take up a teaching position; I never did see myself as a stay-at-home parent.”

“Is there room in that world for Abigail and Mischa . . . for me?”

“I have five first-class tickets in my jacket pocket. You can check, if you like.”

“If I check, you’d accuse me of failing to trust you.”

“So then you will come?” Hannibal asked. “I assume this time is not a set-up?”

Will furrowed his brow . . . *eight months* . . . *only a butterfly in Lithuania and a heat in Italy* . . . his hand ran over his face, where it pulled at the skin and added to his years. He drew in a deep breath, while intricately examining every inch of the painting, and – with a low hum – realised that the sketch of his image was actually that of Achilles. Will cast his eye to the satchel, where knife and picture likely sat side-by-side. Hannibal simply bounced Aldona on his lip; she suckled at teething-ring and watched with heavily lidded eyes, as Will asked with a sigh:

“Is Chiyoh coming with us, too?”

“Is there any reason why she would?”

“Well, she seems awfully attached to you,” said Will. “I was travelling with her for a while, just the four of us moving through Europe, until . . . you know . . . she decided that her loyalty to you was stronger than taking a chance on me, at which point she left me.”

“Oh? Well, she could not risk that you still sought to kill me.”

“Hannibal, she pushed me from a moving train!”

“That’s my girl,” laughed Hannibal.

The rumbling of his chest ran through Aldona. She threw herself back against him, landing with an audible thud on his abdomen, and laughed wildly with him, as she kicked at the air with feet that were covered with shoes more expensive than what Will owned. Hannibal stood and lifted Aldona high, so that her head rested on his shoulder. He supported her with one loose hand, in case she threw herself backward, while her weight was braced on the crook of his arm. They made for a beautiful sight. Will instinctively rose to join them, as Hannibal continued:

“I take it that Abigail and Mischa are with Chiyoh still?”

“No, that’s the funny thing,” replied Will. “Chiyoh openly told Abigail what she’d done, but just departed at the planned stop and left Abigail without a word. Luckily, Abigail learned a lot from you . . . she has your smarts and self-preservation . . . she waited for me a different hotel, looked after Mischa, and found me once I arrived in the city. She didn’t take chances.”

“And will Abigail try to kill me? As you once planned?”

“If you want me to be honest, yes . . . *one day*. That day isn’t today.”

A smile broke over Hannibal unlike the others. It caused his head to lift high, while his eyes stared off dreamily at some unfixed spot, and – to Will – it seemed he was almost proud that their daughter would one day attempt or succeed in taking his life, as if he longed for that time. He said nothing, however, and simply placed Aldona back into her pushchair. The buckles were securely fastened to keep her in placed, before she handed Hannibal her teething-ring, which he obediently took with a chuckle. He asked Will offhandedly, as he put the ring away:

“Are you finally ready to be a family?”

“When did we stop?”

Will came around and dropped a hand onto the pushchair. It rested light on the handle, exactly in the middle between both men, and – with a half-smile – he looked up to Hannibal and back down to his hand, before turning away his gaze with flushed cheeks. A low chuckle escaped Hannibal, who placed his hand over Will’s in turn. Their fingers entwined. The touch was gentle and soft, with a slight squeeze that spoke of deeper affection and desire. Will blinked back tears.

“I wish I could understand you,” sighed Will.

Hannibal pressed a kiss to his cheek. The warm nature of his lips brought a moan from Will, who turned towards them and pressed his to that of his lover, and together they simply stood connected with a lingering touch, before lips parted from the chaste kiss. Hannibal stepped aside to allow Will to push Aldona, and draped an arm over Will’s shoulders. They walked in time with one another, until Will had almost forgotten what was last said, as Hannibal swore to him:

“You will . . .”

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